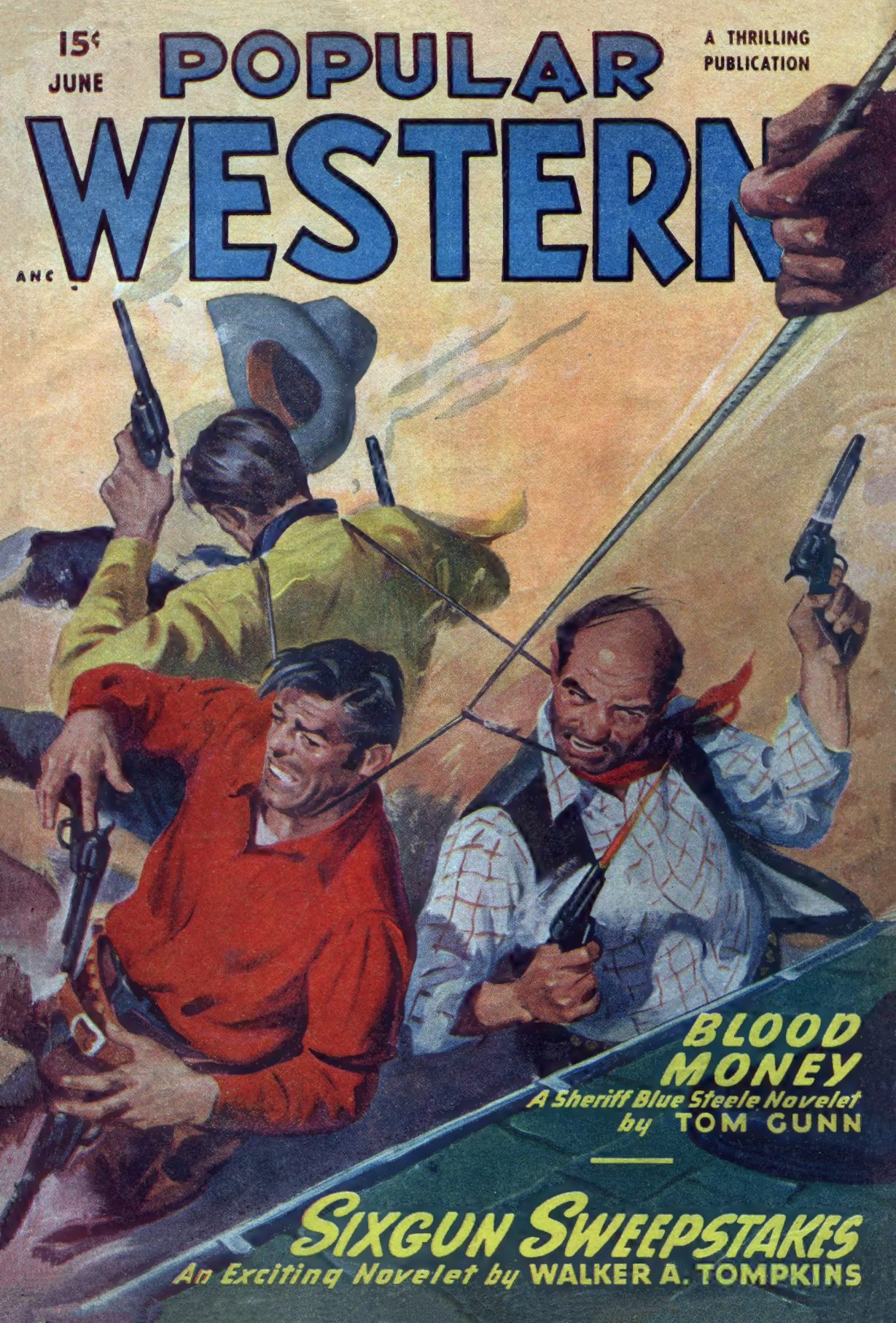
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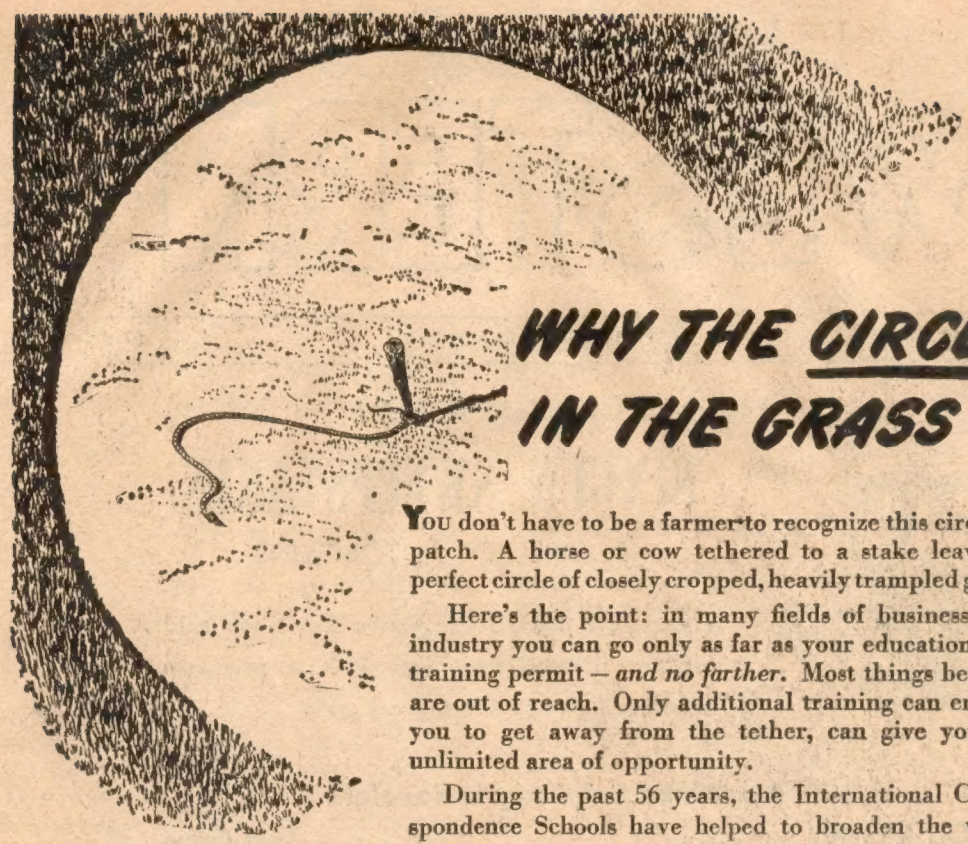

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Things were peaceful for Marshal Tex Grant until handsome Devroid Lucas brought his notched gun and stacked deck back to Caprock town! 9

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HAM AND FLUFFY RUFFLES ..... Alfred L. Garry 95
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The HOME CORRAL

A DEPARTMENT FOR READERS

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DOC LONG TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! Just the other day I was on a looksee through the Southwestern desert country and at a crossroads I saw a sign that wasn't there last time I passed thataway. It said: DOG DUDE RANCH.

Seems as though there's a growing objection in hotels and other tourist stopovers

to dog-toting guests. So this Fido hotel was the natural outcome. Now everybody's happy. It's a booming new business, I'm told.

There's another new industry Out West. It's cork-farming. Seems as though cork-producing countries, Portugal, Spain and North Africa, produce 300,000 tons a year, which is a heap of cork. But not enough, as United States uses more'n half of it.

Cork Farming

Now California, well-suited to growing cork oaks, has started a planting program. A stretch of highway was bordered lately with a planting of 6000 trees. The cork is grown in the form of bark, which is stripped off annually. Each year it grows thicker and better and as the trees get bigger they beautify the landscape.

Besides bottle stoppers, cork is needed for flooring, insulating and sound-proofing, for fish net floats and life preservers and many other uses. Cork oaks grow slow but they don't need much attention. Maybe that's what I was cut out to be—a cork farmer.

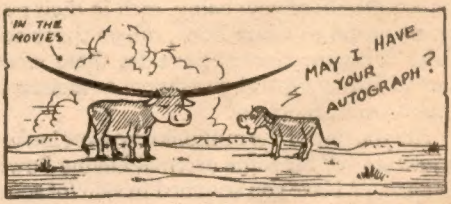
There are remarkable changes in the world of growing things. The changes are as numerous and important as in the world of mechanical invention. Along with new models in automobiles, soon we'll have something new in the taste line. It's in production already, passing from experimental to production planting in the desert regions.

A New Orange

It's a new orange, a cross of the Algerian mandarin orange, a tangerine and a standard variety called the Temple orange. The new strain is suited to thrive in a hot, dry climate and withstand the blistering heat of a desert summer. It is expected that the new fruit will greatly increase the acreage suitable for citrus production, which in California, Arizona, Texas and Florida represents an industry amounting to more'n a half-billion dollars yearly.

If you want to know more about the new desert orange, write University of California Citrus Experiment Station, Riverside, California.

Ever since Luther Burbank, the plant wizard, did big things for the potato, the plant world has been on the move. Although you don't hear so much about it as about rockets, atom bombs and self-directed missiles. Even the ordinary beef critter of today is a long jump ahead of the Texas



longhorn that was the base stock of Western ranges not so many years ago. There's not much eating on a longhorn, compared to the bigger, meatier beef cattle grown today. But the odd thing is, a small herd of pure longhorns is worth a pile of money these days. In big demand for Western movies and rodeos.

Wheat, prunes, sugar beets, cotton, berries, corn and a lot of other crops out West grow bigger and better nowadays than they did a generation ago. I recollect when ranchers were excited over a Chilean strain of alfalfa that grew in cold climates, where it is now common.

Even the humble string bean has been transformed from the original variety. Long, ropy strings like hemp had to be stripped off in grandma's day before the family could have a mess of beans. Now they pop crisply open with not a string in a potful. In Oregon I've seen stringless string beans, a new sort, two or three feet long.

A lot of experiments are being made to grow forests bigger and faster and to produce knotless, straight-grained lumber. In the Southwest is a tree strange to Eastern

eyes that has unexplored possibilities, though so far it is used only as an ornament, for shade, windbreak, fenceposts and firewood.

The Eucalyptus

This is the eucalyptus, introduced from Australia about a century ago. It grows fast, up to 50 feet tall in five or six years in favorable localities, to five feet thick at the base after thirty years or so.

The eucalyptus does well in hot, dry locations and when cut sprouts out vigorously from the stump. It does well in northern Mexico, too, and I'm waiting to hear about somebody planting groves for wood pulp in paper-making and for use in furniture and plywood finishing.

There are about 100 varieties of the eucalyptus grown in the West, from the stately, graceful blue gums, the hardiest one to the crimson-flowered eucalyptus which travelers say is as showy as the framboyan or flame trees of tropical America. Eucalyptus oil has a medicinal value and is used in linaments and cold remedies.

In my memory has come the tamarix trees from India, a sort of evergreen that flour-

(Continued on page 106)

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Things were peaceful for Marshal Tex Grant until handsome Devroid Lucas brought his notched gun and stacked deck back to Caprock town. . . .

As Crockett stepped off the train, Tex Grant reached out to grab the red signal lantern off its bracket

SIXGUN SWEEPSTAKES

an exciting novelet

by

WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CHAPTER I

Mercenary Marshal

A FRESH batch of reward posters had arrived in the noon mail. Marshal Tex Grant was giving them a routine look-over in the jail office with his rawboned deputy, Hoptoad Henchley, when the screen door creaked open

to admit a swarm of flies and Carola Wheeler.

In spite of the dust and the punishing heat of a Washington state summer, the girl looked as fresh as a new-blown rosebud. She carried an armload of booklets fresh off the printing press and which the two lawmen recognized as the souvenir programs for next week's rodeo.

Carola was secretary of the Caprock Stampede Committee, in charge of signing up the contestants, and just for the devil of it Grant had entered the cross-country stagecoach race.

"You'll be traveling in fast company Monday," Carola remarked, tossing Grant a folder. "The biggest names in rodeo are lined up for Dad's Stampede."

Hoptoad Henchley paused in his perusal of the bounty dodgers to bend a disapproving eye at the girl and make an under-breath remark about how loud money could talk. Carola's sire, old Senator Zack Wheeler, could buy and sell Caprock, or Cascade County for that matter. The $50,000 he had advanced as prize money was tempting bait for any follower of the rodeo circuit.

Grant tipped back his El Stroud somhair, propped his spurred cowboots on the roll-top desk and scanned the list of contestants on the back page. His lips puckered in a low whistle as he saw that several riders of world-champion caliber would be making a bid for their share of the Senator's lavish sweepstakes.

SUDDENLY he felt a sharp, needling anger and he glanced up to surprise a mocking smile on the girl's lips. It gave Grant the annoying impression that Carola was lingering in the doorway to catch his reaction to the rodeo pamphlet, rather than because she liked his company.

"I see you've accepted an entry fee from an hombre named Devroid Lucas, of Denver," the marshal said, and the soft musical drawl he had brought out from Texas was lost under the sharp bitterness in his voice. "Would that be the same Lucas I ordered out of Caprock three years ago? The tinhorn sport who was makin' a play for your affections?"

Carola's shoulders lifted and fell under the apricot silk blouse with the words CAPROCK STAMPEDE, JULY 4, 5, 6 embroidered across the back. At twenty, she filled out that blouse in a brero off a moist shock of raven black way to catch a man's eye coming or going, and there was no escaping the fact that her shining wheat-gold hair and blue eyes and supple grace complemented her figure.

"I wonder if it could be, now?" she bantered archly. "After all, Marshal, our Stampede is open to all comers."

Deputy Hoptoad Henchley snapped out of his lethargy as he saw Tex Grant swing his legs off the desk and give his gun belt a sharp hitch. That mannerism, Hoptoad knew from experience, betokened a rising anger in the young Texan.

"It ain't open to a gunhawk of Dev Lucas' stripe," Grant contradicted her flatly. "Like I pointed out to you and the Senator three years back, I knew Lucas down in the Rio Grande country. He's got a black record. When I gave Lucas his walkin' papers the week after your father hired me to tame this town, I warned Lucas that Caprock wasn't big enough to hold the two of us. And that ultimatum still stands."

A notch appeared briefly between the girl's brows. Then she tossed her head haughtily, plucking at the chin strap of her Stetson.

"You wouldn't be jealous of Dev's good looks and charming manners, would you, Mister Professional Marshal?"

Irritation brought a flush to Grant's lean, brown face. True, he was a mercenary, a lawman hired by Senator Zack Wheeler to whip the lawless element out of this little wheat-cattle town, rather than a duly elected public official.

What galled him was the unfairness of her scorn, for the Senator's daughter knew what Grant was doing with his money. Proving up the little Box G homestead he had filed on, up where the Sweetwater joined the Yakima upstream from Prosser. When Grant got his herd started and had leased some graze from the Indian agency he would unpin his law badge for keeps, and Carola knew it.

"Jealous?" he snorted, ignoring the whiplash of her scorn. "Listen, sister. When I set my sights on a woman, it won't be the type Dev Lucas would want. Not the spoiled-brat daughter of a millionaire. I ain't a fortune-hunter."

It was Carola Wheeler's turn to be angry now. She went white around the mouth, and Hoptoad Henchley's discreet chuckle didn't help matters any.

"Be that as it may, Marshal," she re-

With such devastating surprise did the .45-70 bullet catch his blue roan. Grant had no time to free his legs from the stirrups

torted, "Devroid Lucas will arrive on the Rodeo Special from Walla Walla this afternoon, along with the other rodeo performers. There's nothing you can do about it, short of making a fool of yourself."

She turned on her heel and pushed her way out into the throng which jammed the board walk outside.

"That arrogant little tyrant!" he growled, fishing in his faded hickory shirt for cigarette papers and Durham tobacco. "She ought to be tanned with a pea-elm switch!"

Hoptoad Henchley spat on his palm and polished the deputy's badge pinned to his gallus strap. He was twice Grant's age, an ex-Ranger from Texas who had drifted out to Washington State with Grant four years ago. Henchley had filed on a section of land which adjoined Grant's Box G up the river.

"Carola's a sp'iled one, all right," the oldster commented. "Too bad yuh went sweet on a filly who can't see yuh for dust."

Henchley beat a fast retreat into the cell block to avoid the hard-flung mail order catalogue which Grant launched his way.

ALONE in the stuffy office, Grant tried to crowd Dev Lucas out of his head, but it was no use. Lucas' returning to Caprock in the guise of a rodeo contestant was a trumped-up plot which Carola, no doubt, had engineered to embarrass Grant.

It was no matter of personalities. Lucas was a lady-killer, sure. He was also a tinhorn trouble-maker with a yellow stripe a yard wide running down his back.

The far-off *whoom* of a locomotive whistle broke through Grant's revery, reminding him that a showdown could not be delayed. The Rodeo Special from Walla Walla was approaching the Yakima River bridge, and when it pulled into town, trouble would arrive with it. Maybe gunsmoke trouble.

"Hoptoad!" Grant bawled to his partner. "Keep an eye on the office while I go down to the station. I aim to ask Dev Lucas since when did he quit his card-sharping in favor of bronc-busting. That two-bit sport couldn't straddle a bale of hay."

Old Henchley emerged from the cell block, knowing better than to josh the Wheat ranchers in their blue denim jumpers, rock-eyed buckaroos from the Horse Heaven spreads, stolid Indian bucks from the Yakima Reservation with their fat squaws trailing their heels. River bottom sodbusters accompanied by work-faded womenfolk in challie sacques and starched sunbonnets. Kids, dogs, flies, heat, and dust mingled in a confused panorama.

Senator Zack Wheeler, so-called because he had once occupied a chair in the Territorial Legislature over in Olympia, had poured his money lavishly into advertising this brainchild of his. There was no denying that Caprock would win its place on the map by staging Washington's first frontier show and roundup.

The $50,000 in prize money which Wheeler had laid on the barrelhead was drawing the top rodeo hands of the West to this jerkwater cowtown and wheat-shipping center. Champions whose names were commonplace around the arenas of Calgary and Pendleton and Cheyenne and the California rodeo towns.

That was *bueno*, Grant supposed. But Grant knew that along with the professional rodeo folk—decent, hard-working waddies and cowgirls, all—would come an army of riffraff to prey on the town. marshal under the circumstances.

Because Lucas was defying the banishment order Grant had handed him three years ago, the marshal was taking extra care to check the cartridge in his Walker .44 and he was thonging it down the toe end of his holster, snugging it tight against his saddle-warped leg. That was a little quick draw insurance which Grant hadn't practiced since he was a rookie Ranger in Henchley's company down on the Pecos.

"I'll have a cell swept out for the mangy son," Hoptoad commented gravely. "Just in case Lucas insists on gettin' off that train."

Grant stepped out on the jail porch, flexing the muscles of his whang-thewed, six-foot frame like a man steeling himself to finish some unpleasant business.

This was Saturday and the Stampede wasn't to start until Monday morning, but already Caprock was jammed with humanity. Cow ponies and farmers' hacks occupied every available inch of hitchrack space.

The boardwalks teemed with a motley cross-section of rangeland humanity.

Gamblers and painted jezebels and gun-toting soldiers of misfortune like this Devroid Lucas sport.

Foot traffic was moving in a sluggish tide toward the dingy railroad station, and Tex Grant drifted with it, moving a his usual bowlegged, rolling gait.

His slight limp had its genesis on the rodeo arena, when he had gotten his right shinbone broken three times in two successive seasons of bucking-horse competition. Caprock didn't know that, assuming his limp to be a memento of his Texas Ranger career. They took the game leg for granted, just as they accepted his steeple-crowned Texas Stetson, his spike-heeled star boots with the Mexican jinglebob spurs, his drawling speech, and other alien mannerisms.

GRANT was popular in Caprock—with most everyone except fiery, arrogant, young Carola Wheeler. The town knew him as a fighting two-gun marshal whom Senator Zack Wheeler had imported to tame Caprock when the town had begun to develop into a battleground between feuding cattlemen and wheat ranchers, four years ago.

This Stampede that the Senator's money was bringing to Caprock provided a welcome break in the monotony of the town, isolated in the barren Rattlesnake Hills on the site of an early-day emigrant crossing on the Yakima. But Grant would be glad when it was finished.

There was a milling throng down by the railroad station, and the marshal saw that Zack Wheeler had driven his fringe-topped, glittering surrey up on the freight platform, alongside the brass band he had imported from Ellensburg.

Wheeler reminded Grant of a fat, overdressed toad, standing up there in his surrey, dressed in a beaver tophat and black fustian steelpen coat despite the sweltering heat of the day.

Zack Wheeler had made his money the hard way, in wheat market manipulations and horse breeding. He owned the vast Flying W mustang range between the Horse Heavens and the Columbia River. He had erected the big grain elevators and warehouses which dominated Caprock's sprawl of unpainted buildings.

The brass band struck up a lively martial air as the diamond-stacked locomotive hauled its string of day coaches off the Yakima River bridge and snorted up the tracks toward the depot with bell clanging and steam cocks hissing.

The local Stampede Committee, businessmen self-conscious in their gaudy Wild West costumes, drew up inside the enclosure where the train would halt to unload its cowboy celebrities.

Tex Grant elbowed his way through the press of spectators which surrounded the Senator's rig. Wheeler was mopping his florid, close-shaven jowels with a silk handkerchief, his address of welcome clutched in a moist, trembling fist.

Glancing around, Grant spotted Carola Wheeler climbing up into the surrey beside her father. This was a triumphant moment for the Wheelers.

The Rodeo Special ground to a halt. Passengers in Stetsons and fancy-stitched boots and flashy shirts began alighting from the coaches, pausing in awkward amusement as they saw the Committee lined up to greet them. Grant tipped his hat brim down to mask his face as he saw old friends among the performers who had come here to compete for Wheeler's prize money.

The greats and would-be greats of the rodeo world were here in force. Lee Ferry, grand prizewinner at the Pendleton Round-Up for three years running. Chuck Wilcox, world's champion bulldogger. Texanna Fordyce, queen of cowgirls. Skinny Sutton, whip expert and unbeaten calf-roper from coast to coast.

Then Grant saw Dev Lucas alighting from the coach platform, packing a carpetbag and a sacked saddle, with a Peacemaker .45 at his hip that had a row of notches filed in its backstrap.

CHAPTER II

Trouble Trap

THE tall, black-haired gunman from the Rio Grande country looked as handsome and swashbuckling as Grant remembered him from his Ranger days. He had limpid black eyes which women found irresistible, and his black mustache was always pomaded and jauntily corkscrewed.

He wore a flat-crowned black Stetson

Degrew began fanning his triggerless Colt as Grant's right-hand gun spat flame

with a snakeskin band, and a brown town coat with braided hems on the lapels. A diamond horseshoe flashed in his silk cravat. His linen was starched. A gold nugget watch chain dropped in twin nodes across his bed-of-flowers waistcoat.

But there was menace behind the veneer of garish gentility which Lucas assumed. He had been running a roulette wheel at the Diamond Casino here in Caprock when Tex Grant had taken over the reins of the town. Then more recently, there had been talk that Lucas was the brains behind the cattle rustling activities down in Oregon.

The rodeo stars were lining up to receive the handshakes of the committeemen. The band was blaring, the bass drum throbbing like a giant's heartbeat.

Tex Grant reached out to touch Lucas on the sleeve as the gunhawk set down his baggage and moved as if to join the shuffling queue of performers.

Lucas glanced around. The smile froze on his wide mouth as he recognized the lean Texan with the law badge on his calfhide vest. In the comparative hush which followed the band's cymbal-clashing coda, Grant pitched his voice low and spoke for Dev Lucas' ears alone.

"Just passin' through town, Dev?"

Lucas sucked in a deep breath. His darting glance hung a moment on somebody off beyond the ropes, and Grant knew he had located Carola, seated in her father's surrey. She was the real motive for his return to Caprock, Grant knew.

"No, friend Grant. I reckon I'm stayin'. Any objections?"

A bleak grin twisted the marshal's lips but the smile wasn't mirrored in his narrowed, smoke-gray eyes.

"You know the answer to that, Lucas. You ain't wanted here."

The rodeo performers were applauding with bored enthusiasm as the welcoming committee introduced Senator Zack Wheeler and that pompous individual launched into his prepared speech. Dev Lucas pulled his attention back to Grant and his ultimatum.

"You get a grudge between your teeth

and you can't let go, can you, Grant?" Lucas laid a manicured hand on the marshal's arm. "Listen, amigo. This is not the time nor the place to have an argument. I've got reservations at the Pioneer House for Rodeo Week. Suppose you drop around this evening and we'll discuss our differences over a friendly bottle."

Grant shook his head.

"As soon as the performers' stock and baggage are unloaded, this train pulls out for Pasco. You're goin' to be on it."

Dev Lucas shrugged. He reached in his vest pocket for a panatela and stuck it between his gold-capped teeth.

"Suppose we go back inside the coach where it's private," he suggested. "You'll force me to miss the Senator's speech, but I can make that sacrifice."

Swinging a glance over his shoulder, Tex Grant saw Carola Wheeler regarding their little by-play tensely, her face seeming a white, strained mask behind her father's oratorical gesturings.

Lucas was swinging up the platform steps. Grant followed him, conscious of a prickling annoyance at having to waste time on a four-flusher of Lucas' breed.

Three passengers were waiting inside the car, their baggage piled on the aisle beside their seats as if they were waiting for the reception to break up outside before quitting the train. Grant had the fleeting impression that he had seen at least two of the men somewhere before,

but the thought was crowded into the back of his mind as he saw that they knew Dev Lucas.

"Gents," Lucas said, pausing in the aisle beside the baggage, "this is Tex Grant, the star-toter who ramrods this burg. As I predicted, he objects to my tryin' to make an honest dollar in their little Wild West carnival."

Grant's steely gaze shuttled over the three passengers. They did not have the look of the arena about them, but rather

the soft-handed, slit-eyed stamp of back-room card tables in some frontier deadfall.

ONE of the trio, a beefy man with a set of thick, cinnamon-red Dundrearie whiskers framing his face, got to his feet and extended a beringed, fish-belly-white hand to Grant.

"Pleased to meet the local keeper of the peace, Grant," he drawled unctuously, mouthing a cigar with the words. "My name is Crockett . . . Ace Crockett. I have the honor of bein' Mr. Lucas' business manager."

Grant accepted Crockett's hand automatically. He sensed his error the instant Crockett's iron fingers locked on his gun hand in a knuckle-crushing grip.

Before the Texan could brace his legs on the carpet, Crockett wrenched his arm forward with a force that threatened to jerk it loose from its socket, hauling Grant headlong against Crockett's barrel chest.

Caught off balance, Grant was helpless to dodge the clubbing gun butt which the pock-scarred man behind Crockett whipped from under his coat, sending the weapon out and down in a chopping blow which caught the marshal behind the right ear.

Sick darkness swirled around him. Grant was faintly aware of pitching face-forward into the pile of bags between the car seats as Ace Crockett released the bone-bending grasp on his hand. Then Lucas' hard-driven boot toe caught him under the heart and everything dissolved in a vortex of flashing fireworks. . . .

When he pulled out of it, Grant was conscious of a swaying motion pulling at his body and his ears caught the rhythmical clickety-click-click of coach wheels over steel rail joints.

He pulled his eyes open, drawing them into focus on a blur of movement passing before him. As his vision cleared, Grant saw that he was staring through a grimy, fly-speckled window of a railroad car. The blurring movement was a panorama of Washington's bleak, sage-dotted hills. The shadows lay at an angle which told him the train was speeding eastward.

Fighting back a retchy feeling in the pit of his stomach, Grant looked around groggily. The coach appeared to be deserted of passengers. Bluebottle flies droned in the windows where late afternoon sunlight streamed into the train, broken by the intermittent shadows of telegraph poles flitting by.

He started to raise his hand toward the throbbing welt on his skull, when he discovered that his wrist was manacled to another man's arm with a pair of handcuffs.

"Relax, my *tejano* friend," came a purring voice in his ear. "Yuh're takin' a little *pasear* to the penitentiary in Walla Walla. Or don't yuh remember?"

Grant twisted his neck around. Seated beside him, his blocky shoulder wedged against the window, was Ace Crockett, his red-whiskered cheeks outlined in golden halo through a haze of cheroot smoke. Sunlight glinted off a law badge pinned to Crockett's lapel, and after a moment's study Grant recognized it, with a confused start, as his own star.

"Where's—Dev Lucas?" the Texan panted hoarsely, shaking his head to clear the red cobwebs which obscured his vision.

The fat stranger took the cheroot from his teeth and flicked ash into the spittoon between his canvas-topped gaiters.

"Never heard of him," Crockett grinned. "It's like this, young man. Like I told the conductor when we pulled out of Caprock an hour ago—yuh're an escaped convict wanted by the warden over in Walla Walla. I'm the John Law who picked yuh up at the Caprock station. Simple, ain't it?"

Tex Grant digested this information in silence, but his mind was clearing fast and a few facts began to marshal themselves into a coherent pattern.

He had played into Lucas' hand by stepping inside the rodeo coach. This fabricated story of Crockett's being a lawman taking a wanted desperado back to Walla Walla might have passed muster with the railroad conductor, but Grant was not so befuddled as to realize that the destination Crockett had in mind for him was boot hill.

Sometime during this night train ride over to eastern Washington, Crockett would stick a knife in his ribs and dump his carcass off the train. There couldn't be any other ending to Crockett's bluff.

A COACH door slammed open behind them and the conductor, a wizened oldster wearing a shiny blue uniform, came lurching down the aisle, a time-

table in his fist. The railroader paused at Crockett's seat to bend a curious stare at his two passengers.

"Rallied around, eh?" the conductor grunted. "He's a plumb mean-lookin' character, Marshal. Dangerous customer, eh?"

Ace Crockett grinned smugly, handing the conductor a gold-banded cheroot.

"The little tussle we had back at Caprock has deranged his thinkin' machinery, skipper. First thing Grant said when he woke up was that he was a lawman himself, the same as me. Wouldn't that frost yore ears?"

Tex Grant watched impassively as the trainmen cackled uproariously while he lighted his cigar.

"Teched in the noggin, eh? Far as that goes, Marshal, yuh shore pulled the wool over my eyes on the trip out. I had yuh ticketed for one of that cowboy circus crowd. Of course, I understand why yuh didn't wear yore star in sight, seein' as how yuh were on a man hunt."

Tex Grant had taken notice of the fact while the conductor was speaking that Crockett had stripped him of his shell belt and holstered .44. His gun probably reposed in the bulging carpetbag on the rack over Crockett's seat.

"When's yore next stop, conductor?" Crockett wanted to know.

The conductor consulted a turnip watch.

"We take on water at Sagebrush, Marshal. Be there around dark. Yuh change trains at Pasco Junction."

The conductor lurched his way on through the car and disappeared.

Grant settled back against the hard wicker seat, closing his eyes so he could think straighter. He wondered how long it would take the strength to come back in his free arm. He dared not risk a haymaker now, for it would probably land on Crockett's jaw with all the effect of a puffball. The outlaw wore a gun, if he had read the bulge under Crockett's armpit right, but there was no chance of snatching the weapon from the angle he was sitting.

"Dev Lucas must have been all-fired anxious to enter Wheeler's rodeo," he commented. "Since when was he a bronc rider?"

Crockett dropped his cigar butt into the cuspidor.

"Not necessarily a bronc rider, friend. Dev's too careful of his good looks to risk gettin' piled by an outlaw cayuse, no matter how rich the prizes." Crockett chuckled. "I reckon Dev knows easier ways to make a million bucks than follow in' the rodeo business."

Grant felt a quick anger kindling within him. There was no mistaking Crockett's inference.

"Such as marryin' the money?" he suggested.

"Could be. This Wheeler girl has been writin' Dev regular, over in Denver. She gave him the idea of comin' back to Caprock and enterin' this Stampede."

Tex Grant thought that over. It was beyond his comprehension how a girl of Carola Wheeler's wealth and breeding, a graduate of the University up in Seattle, could find herself attracted to an obvious four-flusher like Lucas. He recalled the mocking laughter in her eyes when he had spotted Lucas' name in the rodeo program today.

Darkness settled over the parched Washington terrain and an hour later the locomotive up ahead moaned its signal to the tank tender at the Sagebrush whistle stop. Brake shoes squealed under the trucks and the coaches racked and jolted to a halt.

"We'll step outside for a stretch and a sniff of fresh air while the engineer's takin' on water," Ace Crockett announced, stirring out of a doze. "It's a long ride between here and Walla Walla, son."

Grant felt his pulses speed up. *This is where Crockett aims to kill me,* he was thinking as they got to their feet, the handcuff link rattling between their fettered wrists. *He'll probably leave the train and flag the next west-bound back to Caprock to join Lucas and his sidekicks.*

SUSPENSE was a live, writhing thing inside him as Ace Crockett led the way down the narrow aisle. They shouldered through the back door of the coach together and stepped out on the rear platform, the cool night air hitting their sweaty faces.

Crockett jerked on the handcuff and headed down the steps, on the opposite side of the train from the water tank. His face took on a satanic red glow in the glare of the ruby tail lantern.

Grant wondered what form death would take. A slug over the skull with a pistol barrel, probably, and then a knife

in the liver. Crockett wouldn't risk a shot reaching the ears of the train crew.

Grant was on the middle step when Crockett jumped to the ballasted roadstead. As his free hand slid down the iron grab rail, Tex Grant reached out to grab the red signal lantern off its bracket. At the same instant he launched himself off the steps, his knees driving hard against the top of Crockett's shoulder.

The outlaw grunted, drawing the six-gun from his armpit holster as his footing slipped on the loose cinders. Before he could swing the gun around, Grant's swinging arm smashed the red lantern against the nape of Crockett's bull neck.

Ruby glass flew in shards as Grant's weight drove Crockett to his knees. With a desperate grunt, the marshal of Caprock yanked hard on Crockett's handcuffed arm, hauled himself astraddle Crockett's back, and stomped a spike-heeled cowboot at the gun in the outlaw's free hand.

Crockett fell face down against the crossties of the sidetrack flanking the main line rails. Grant drove his left fist hard at Crockett's exposed temple, felt the man's head roll soddenly under the hammering blow.

A gurgling exhalation escaped Crockett's fat throat as Grant, pushing his brief moment of advantage, clawed the six-gun from the outlaw's outstretched hand.

"All right, Crockett. We'll see who—"

Grant's snarl died off as he saw that his adversary had been the victim of a fluke of destiny. In falling against the sidetrack, Crockett's head had struck a protruding spike from a fishplate. The spike had punched a ghastly hole in the outlaw's left temple. Death had been instantaneous.

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CHAPTER III

Kicked Out

A BRAKEMAN was coming down the right of way, swinging a lantern as he spot-checked truck journal packings in search of possible hotboxes.

Unstraddling his legs from Crockett's body, Grant hauled on the handcuff and dragged the dead man across the siding and down the tumbleweeds which furred the pit of the roadbed trough.

He bellied down beside the dead man as the brakie reached the end of the train, the high-ballasted roadbed shielding him from the lantern beams.

The hoghead tooted a couple of short blasts and a bell clanged in the night. Steam hissed. The brakeman, lantern swinging in the arcs of a high-ball signal, hopped aboard the rear platform as the Rodeo Special got under way.

Coming to his knees, Tex Grant watched until the receding red eye of the remaining tail lantern dwindled in the distance. He was alone in the night, save for the prairie water tender who by now had returned to his lonely shack fifty yards down the tracks.

Grant fumbled through Ace Crockett's pockets until he found a ring of keys. The handcuffs were his own, so he had no trouble in identifying the key to fit them. A moment later he had released his wrist from the constricting steel bracelet, unlocked Crockett's cuff and pocketed the irons.

Then he rolled the dead man over on his back and recovered his marshal's badge. As an afterthought he unbuckled the gun harness from under Crockett's coat and strapped it on his own shoulder, thrusting the short-barreled Root side-hammer .36 pistol into the holster.

He dragged Crockett's corpse out of the roadbed ditch and toppled it behind a shanty used to house a section gang's handcar. Let the tank tender discover the dead man on the morrow. Grant had no interest in solving the mystery for him.

The growing yellow eye of a locomo-

tive headlight, at the far end of the V of tracks to the east, informed Grant that luck was changing in his favor. A freight train was approaching. Should it stop to take on water at this whistle stop, his transportation back to Caprock town would be solved.

Getting his bearings on the remote hills to westward, Grant estimated that the train had carried him a good seventy-odd miles east of the Cascade county seat. He wondered irrelevantly if Carola Wheeler had noted his absence yet. Not likely. Right about now, she'd be dancing at the big Cowboy Ball in the grange hall, which the Senator had arranged to start off the Rodeo Week festivities.

The oncoming freight slowed down as it rattled across the spur track switch east of the water tank, and rumbled on past the spot where Tex Grant crouched in the darkness. Wheat cars, west-bound and running empty. Consigned to the elevator siding at Caprock, probably, to pick up another golden cargo of Wheeler grain for the flour mills at Portland or Tacoma.

Running along the cinder apron beside the wheat train, Tex Grant sized up the speed and decided to risk hopping a box car on the fly.

Jumping a freight train, even at twenty miles an hour, was a dangerous business, for a missed hand-hold on a grab rail could fling him back under the rods where the wheels could grind him to hashmeat in an instant.

Box cars rumbled past with a din of clanking drawbar couplings. Timing his jump, Grant vaulted to an iron step and grabbed a ladder rung bolted to the front end of a car.

Momentum slammed him hard against the red boards, inertia clawing at the fingers locked to the ladder rung. Then he got a fresh hold and clung there, the wind whipping his face. The freight was picking up speed fast, smoke and cinders pelting Grant's eyes as the hog-head fed steam to the cylinders and throttled the train up to the fifty-mile clip that was permitted by road regulations.

A whistle-post bore down out of the night and Grant hugged his body close to the side of the car to avoid being knocked off by the passing timber. Then he climbed up to the car roof and, clinging to a brake wheel rod, stretched himself out on the horizontal catwalk planks.

IT WAS nearing midnight when the train slowed to a crawl and rumbled across the Yakima River trestle into the outskirts of Caprock. The freight shunted off the main line onto the siding which tapped Wheeler's grain elevators. Grant waited until the train braked to a halt before clambering down off the car.

Every sinew in his body ached from the icy winds which had whipped at him during the run from Sagebrush. His bones throbbed and the old fractures in his right shin were giving him trouble, forcing him to walk with a dragging limp.

If Caprock had been crowded at five o'clock, midnight found the holiday congestion doubled.

Grant made his way unnoticed to the jailhouse. He unlocked the front office, went into the annex where he and Hoptoad had their living quarters, and washed up. He donned a fresh shirt to replace the blood-spattered garment he was wearing, and tossed aside Ace Crockett's uncomfortable shoulder holster. The ache of a cracked rib below his heart made breathing difficult.

A commotion sounded in the front office as Grant was buckling on a shell belt and the mate to his Walker .44 which by now was in Pasco inside Crockett's unclaimed carpetbag.

Snugging the Colt against his thigh, Grant opened the door in time to see Hoptoad Henchley escorting a cursing, badly intoxicated cowpuncher into the jail proper.

Tex Grant was waiting in the front office when his wizened deputy came back, jingling a ring of keys. The old ex-Ranger eyed the marshal in amazement.

"Now where in tarnation have you been all evenin', son?" he demanded testily. "I've shore had my hands full breakin' up fights."

Grant gave him the gist of what had happened.

"Huh," the deputy grunted. "That means this Lucas hombre is roostin' here in town right under my nose."

The marshal nodded bleakly.

"Sided by a pair of hard cases like Crockett," Grant said. "I got a notion I'll find the three of them registered at the Pioneer House, waitin' for Crockett to show up and report my permanent absence."

Hoptoad Henchley moved after Grant

as the marshal limped out under the wooden-awninged porch. Grant, reading his deputy's thought, shook his head grimly.

"I'll dab my loop on Lucas without your help, amigo."

Henchley waggled his head soberly as he watched Grant cross the street in the direction of the ramshackle two-story frame hotel called the Pioneer House, which Wheeler had leased outright for the accommodation of his out-of-town performers.

There was plenty of time. The Cowboy Ball was breaking up over at the grange hall, and Dev Lucas had probably attended the jamboree. An unreasoning anger goaded the Texan as he realized that Carola had probably been the four-flusher's dancing partner for the evening.

He ducked into a Chinese eatery next door to the hotel and killed thirty minutes taking care of the hunger-ache in his stomach. Then he left the restaurant and trailed his spurs into the Pioneer House lobby.

The big room was jammed with cowpunchers and gamblers and wheat-belt harvest hands, eager to rub shoulders with the rodeo people. Grant approached the clerk's desk, hoping to avoid any old friends from the tarmac world.

Skinny Perkins, the pimple-faced reception clerk, grinned importantly as he recognized the town marshal.

"Devroid Lucas? Yes, sir. You'll find him in Room Six at the top of the stairs, Tex. Senator Wheeler and Miss Carola are visitin' him up there now. They just got in from the dance."

Grant scowled, moving toward the staircase. Lucas worked fast, all right.

The marshal loosened his six-gun in holster as he reached the top of the stairs. Lamplight glowed through the open transom over the door marked with the numeral 6. A sound of voices wafted through the opening. Lucas' smooth laughter, and Carola's joining in. It would be a shame to bust up this little after-the-ball party, Grant thought sardonically.

HE RAPPED on the door, heard Lucas' voice inviting him to enter. Grant twisted the doorknob with his left hand, leaving his right free for gunplay if Lucas reacted wrong at seeing a ghost returned from the dead.

Lamplight hit Tex Grant's eyes as he stepped into the room and eased the door shut with a spurred heel. His entrance froze the room's occupants in momentary tableau.

Dev Lucas, immaculate in starched shirt and fancy California buckskin-foxed pants, was in the act of pouring a glass of wine for the Senator, who was seated on a horsehair sofa to the left of the doorway. Wheeler was well on his way toward being drunk.

Carola, dressed in a clinging satin frock which had undoubtedly made her the belle of the ball tonight, was bending over her father, lighting a cigar for him.

"Well—speak of the devil!" Lucas broke the strained hush, yet by not so much as a muscle-twitch did he betray surprise at seeing the marshal alive. "Pull up a chair, Grant. You're just in time to drink a toast to the new marshal of Caprock. You didn't know it, but you're through, Grant!"

The Texan remained where he was, feet wide spread, one hand lightly brushing against the walnut butt of his Walker .44. The significance of Lucas' words had not yet penetrated his undestanding.

"We'll overlook the little business on the train this afternoon, Lucas." Grant's voice was a steely monotone, shot through with restrained menace. "I told you to get out of town once, or fog your guns the next time our trails crossed. And this is the next time. So make your play, Lucas. Now! Or else get goin'!"

Dev Lucas made a business of pouring a goblet of champagne. Without looking at Grant, he spoke to the Senator.

"You see what I mean, Mr. Wheeler?" he said. "The man's a born killer."

Carola gave a little gasp as her father heaved himself out of his chair, leveling a cigar at the Texan as if it were a gun.

"You forget you are a mercenary, Grant, not a duly elected public law officer. Effective tonight, you are no longer authorized to order *anybody* out of town. I'll thank you to hand over that badge."

Tex Grant heard the politician out in numb amazement. He saw Dev Lucas turn toward him, lifting his champagne glass.

"As I said, Grant," Lucas grinned, "I have been offered the marshalship of Caprock, and I have accepted."

Grant's fingers loosened on his gun. Wheeler had ham-strung him to a fare-you-well, and because of this he was be-

ing made a ridiculous figure now. He pulled himself into control with a visible effort.

"Let me congratulate you, Senator," he said drily, reaching up with a savage gesture and unpinning the star from his vest. "If a stacked deck and a notched gun is what you're lookin' for in a marshal, Lucas is the man for the job."

He flung the star toward Lucas, forcing the gunhawk to drop the glass of champagne on the rug in order to catch it. Without altering his debonair manner, Lucas pinned on the badge, and with it, a subtle change crossed his face.

"You're either drunk or crazy, Grant. Get out!"

CHAPTER IV

Wanted, Dead or Alive

PULLING his gaze over to Carola Wheeler, the Texan surprised a look in her eyes he hadn't expected to see. Apology rather than triumph was there, and Grant couldn't figure it, since Lucas' appointment must have been authored by the Senator's daughter tonight. She probably realized he'd been dealt a blow below the belt, Grant thought, and now, tardily, regretted it.

"Ace Crockett," he said to Lucas, "has left for a warmer climate—permanently. I'll see you later, Lucas. What I said about Caprock bein' too small for the two of us still goes."

He turned on his heel and jerked open the door. In the act of stepping out into the corridor, Lucas called after him.

"I'll expect you to clear your personal gear out of the jail office before morning, Grant. And you might tell that mossyhorn deputy of yours to leave his badge on the desk. I'll appoint my own associates."

Tex Grant headed on down the lobby stairs. Midway down, he spotted the two hard cases he had seen with Ace Crockett on the Rodeo Special that afternoon. They were coming up from the lobby, and a meeting was impossible to avoid, even if Grant had wanted it that way. He was too tired to settle with them tonight.

Surprise crossed the face of the smallpox scarred hombre whose gun had whipped across Grant's skull. His companion, a *mestizo* by the swart look of him, turned gray as their eyes met.

"Evenin', gentlemen!" Grant drawled, crowding them against the bannister as he pushed by. "Can't a ghost come back to his old stampin' grounds?"

Hoptoad Henchley was waiting for him at the jail. Somewhere in the cell block out back, a drunken trio of cowboys were trying out their dubious harmony on *Sweet Adeline*.

"No prisoner?" the ex-Ranger asked. "Yuh didn't locate Lucas?"

Grant strode into their sleeping quarters and stripped the blankets off one of the cots there.

"Pack your warsack and saddle up your Nellie mare, Hoptoad. And take off that star. We're off Wheeler's payroll as of now."

Hoptoad Henchley came to the door and heard his partner out in stunned silence.

[*Turn page*]

HEADACHE
UPSET TOMACH
JUMPY NERVES
RELIEF!
THANKS TO FAMOUS
BROMO-SELTZER
Millions turn to Bromo-Seltzer to relieve ordinary headache three ways. It's famous for giving fast help. Caution: Use only as directed. Get Bromo-Seltzer at your drugstore fountain or counter today.
A product of Emerson Drug Company since 1887.
BROMO SELTZER

"It ain't like yuh, son, takin' a rawhidin' like that lyin' down," the old Texan said finally. "I'd as soon turn a herd of sheep over to a curly wolf as to leave that mangey Dev Lucas in charge of Caprock."

Grant finished slamming his few personal knickknacks into the warbag which had been strapped to his cantle when they had ridden into Washington State four years ago. He brushed past Henchley and sat down at the rolltop desk.

"We're not leavin' town just yet awhile," he said cryptically. "I ain't so sorry this happened, at that. I've been hankerin' for quite a spell to pull stakes out to our homesteads, Hoptoad."

Henchley chewed his mustache for a moment, then picked up his jail keys and stalked out into the cell block. A moment later he returned, herding the reeling trio of cowpokes ahead of him.

"Sober up outside, gents!" rasped the deputy. "Pry up this two-bit town and set off a stick o' dynamite under it, for all I care. The new marshal's going to have to fill his calaboose from scratch!"

When the amazed drunks staggered out into the night, too stupefied to question their freedom, Hoptoad turned to see Grant stuffing the batch of new reward posters into a big envelope.

"We'll camp on the flats across the river tonight," Grant told his partner. "If I'm goin' to drive a stagecoach in that cross-country race Monday, I got to rest up over tomorrow."

In the stable out back, Henchley slapped a kack on his Nellie mare while Grant saddled up Old Blue, the roan cowpony he had brought out from Texas with him. Ten minutes later they were fording the Yakima, at low ebb during the July drought, and picking out a camping spot by the willows which furred the base of the south cutbank.

While the deputy was picketing their saddle horses, Grant rustled up loose brush and driftwood and soon had a fire going.

"You turn in, Hoptoad," the Texan advised his partner. "I got some readin' to catch up on."

By the time Henchley had spread his soogans and drifted off to sleep, Tex Grant had dragged a saddle blanket over beside the fire, hunkered down in the flickering red glow and spilled the reward posters out of the envelope he had brought over from the jailhouse.

HE SPENT half an hour shuffling through the dodgers, consigning the posters one by one to the flames. When he had finished, he had three of the cardboard squares left.

Looking up at him from the topmost poster was the Dundrearie-whiskered face of Ace Crockett. The legend $1,000 REWARD, DEAD OR ALIVE was printed in heavy type over Crockett's photograph, but the name under the picture was Brud Vandecamp.

It appeared that Vandecamp, alias Ace Crockett, was wanted by the sheriff in Dodge City, Kansas, for the murder of a Wells Fargo agent.

A crooked grin relaxed the tension of Grant's face as he flipped Crockett's bounty poster onto the bed of coals, watched it burst into flame and shrivel into ash. In a way, he reflected, it was like burning up a thousand-dollar bill. That is, assuming that Crockett's remains would keep if he chose to ship them to Dodge. Grant had never cashed a bounty check yet, and he didn't aim to start the practise now. First thing in the morning, though, he would telegraph the Kansas sheriff to strike Brud Vandecamp off his wanted list.

Grant turned his attention to the two remaining posters. The first of these did not bear a picture, but it carried a detailed description of a smallpox-scarred desperado named Cherry Postell, wanted by the Border Patrol for murder and smuggling opium.

The second poster was more explicit. It carried a penitentiary profile and full-face photograph of a certain Vance Degrew, wanted dead or alive for the killing of a bank teller during the hold-up of a Silver Exchange in Virginia City, Nevada.

Both Vance Degrew and Cherry Postell were across the river in Caprock, Washington, right this minute. They were the men who had been with Ace Crockett and Dev Lucas in the Rodeo Special day coach, the same men he'd met but an hour or more ago on the stairway of the Pioneer House.

Tex Grant kicked dirt over the campfire after he had carefully folded up the reward notices and put them in his levis pocket. The posters he had glanced at so briefly at mail-time had accounted for the vague familiarity of the men who had been with Lucas in the railroad coach yesterday afternoon.

With that mystery cleared up, Grant shucked his boots and gun harness, pillowed his head on Old Blue's saddle, and stretched out in his blankets under the stars. He went to sleep staring at the myriad lights of Caprock dancing on the shallow ripples of the Yakima.

But even in his dreams, Grant did not find complete respite from bitter reality. Carola Wheeler's face haunted his sleep, and, perversely, she kept insisting on telling him she loved him.

That was the trouble with dreams. They brought out unbidden the secret innermost thoughts of a man's subconscious, crystallizing desires which Tex Grant had scorned to even think about in the cold reality of his waking hours.

They breakfasted at the Oriental's before daylight next morning, to avoid the jam of customers which the dawn would bring. Hoptoad Henchley was weltering in a slough of despondency. Crowding seventy, his shooting eye dimmed and his dramatic past as a Captain of Texas Rangers taking on the slow tarnish of time and distance from the scene of his heyday, Henchley's dignity and self-respect hinged on one factor—his deputyship.

Deprived of his star and the authority that went with it, Henchley faced this new day with the knowledge that he would be a laughing stock among the hoodlums he had once kept in line.

Accordingly, the oldster borrowed a sawbuck from Tex Grant when they left the restaurant and hied himself to the Silver Dollar Bar, planning to either drink himself into oblivion or seek anonymity in some all-day poker game.

GRANT was standing in front of the cafe, moodily chewing a toothpick and watching the town begin to fill up with revelers, when he saw Carola Wheeler and Dev Lucas approaching on horseback. They rode a pair of leggy Arabian blacks, thoroughbreds from the Senator's breeding ranch in the Horse Heavens country.

Lucas works fast, Grant muttered darkly to himself. *Looks like they're gettin' in from a morning joyride up the river.*

He stifled an oath, angry at the stab of jealousy which sight of the girl's windblown radiance brought to him. He watched as Lucas, sporting his marshal's star like a diamond, reined in at the jailhouse across the street and dismounted.

Carola remaind in saddle, leaning from stirrups as the new marshal of Caprock doffed his Stetson and brushed her extended hand with his lips.

If that was Carola's ideas of courtly manners, she was welcome to it. But such high-falutin' horseplay was enough to make a man's gorge rise.

Lucas, elegant in a pair of flaring whipcord riding breeches which would have seemed more fitting for an English bridle path than a Western cowtown, strode jauntly up the jail steps, paused to wave at the girl, and disappeared inside the office.

Carola curvetted her Arabian out into midstreet, wheeling in the direction of her father's big Victorian house at the end of town. She was decked out in a scarlet shirt and batwing chaps which glittered with silver-dollar conchas, and her polished taffy boots were fitted with Spanish jinglebob spurs, dead ringers for the pair buckled to Grant's Coffeyvilles.

She spotted the rangy Texan before he could duck back into the eating place, and spurred her frisky black over to the restaurant hitchrack.

"Tex—can I see you a moment?"

Her voice held a humble note that was completely alien to her character, Grant thought. He shrugged, moving out to halt with the tie-bar between them. Her eyes reminded him of a Texas bluebonnet and he saw a pulse racing in the little pocket at the base of her bronzed throat.

"Tex, I wanted you to know—I'm sorry about last night," she said haltingly. "Dad's always been sold on Dev Lucas. He'd never have fired you that way, after all you've done for us, if he hadn't been in his cups. Dad thinks Mr. Lucas doesn't merit your—your hostility."

Grant spat out his toothpick and reached in his pocket for Durham and thin husks.

"I suppose that's why you've been correspondin' with Lucas over in Denver all these years he's been broodin' in exile?" he remarked drily, recalling Ace Crockett's comment of yesterday.

Glancing up from his job of building a smoke, he saw that his thrust had stabbed home. The petulance was gone from her mouth and she betrayed an unstrung nervous tension as she flicked a chap-clad

knee with her riding quirt.

"Tex," she asked bluntly, "why do you detest me so?"

An odd thrill prickled Grant's spine. He licked and tapered his quirly, glad the flaring brim of his John B. masked his slow rising color from the girl.

"Your father hired me to do a job in Caprock," he evaded her question. "I did that job to the best of my ability. Now that the Senator has found a better man to fill my boots, I see nothin' to stop me from movin' out to my homestead and bein' my own boss for a change."

A hack filled with whooping kids from the nester colony downriver rattled past and the girl had her hands full for a moment, curbing the restive stud.

"Tex," she persisted when the Arabian calmed down, "you haven't answered my question. Why do you hate me so? Is there—was there some woman in your past who hurt you, or what?"

He met her eyes then, and angry lights flickered in them.

"You got the idea your Dad's money can buy you anything, haven't you?" he whipped out. "Even the respect of men you have treated like dirt under heel. You brought Dev Lucas back to Caprock purposely. A hand-kissin', kow-towin' gentleman of culture. Take him and welcome, Carola."

The rebuff was cruel, blunt, and Grant felt a twinge of remorse. Before he could think up something to ease the sting of his words, he caught sight of two riders emerging from the Cloverleaf Livery across the street, and in that instant he forgot that Carola Wheeler even existed.

The riders were Cherry Postell and Vance Degrew.

CHAPTER V

Ambush

IGNORING the girl's cry, Grant ducked under the hitch rail and hurried across the street to where he had hitched Old Blue.

By the time he had tightened the cinch and stepped into saddle, Postell and Degrew had cantered around the corner where the Stockman's Bank stood, and vanished, heading north.

Grant gigged the blue roan out into the stream of wagon traffic which was beginning to fill the main street, rounding the corner by the bank at a high lope.

Up ahead, moving toward the tawny sage-dotted hills which overlooked Caprock on the north, he saw Lucas' outlaw friends taking the Section Line road out of town. They rode at a gallop, twin clouds of thick yellow dust rising in their wake.

Indecision caught Grant then. Degrew and Postell might have rented horses for a Sunday morning airing, killing time before the rodeo started tomorrow. On the other hand, the two wanted men might be shaking the dust of Caprock off their boots for more urgent reasons—Grant's return being one of them.

He let the two riders increase their lead, to vanish in a fold of the hills below the caprock formation which had given the town its name.

Off to the left a wagon road led to the bowl-shaped amphitheater in the hills where Wheeler had leveled off a rodeo arena and erected grandstands, the new yellow lumber gleaming in the morning sunlight.

The two owlhooters were not bent on sizing up the rodeo grounds, then. They were pushing into the barren uplands of the Rattlesnake Hills. There were no ranches or settlements in that direction short of Wenatchee, two hundred miles north.

Passing the big red billboard which directed visitors to the Caprock Stampede grounds, Grant pounded up the long slope. At its crest, he had a vista of the arid Rattlesnakes, flowing off in purple waves to the heat-shimmering horizon. The two horsemen were already out of sight, the dust of their passage lifting in a dull gray smudge against the sky.

Grant spurred the roan into a lope, a tireless, ground-covering gait which the Texas pony could maintain for hours if necessary. Following the twisting road, Grant remembered that it led to the lava-rock formation ten miles north of town known as the Devil's Chair, the only landmark in the area.

Tomorrow afternoon, the cross-country stagecoach race in which Grant was entered as a driver would follow this

same road out of the rodeo grounds, the destination being Devil's Chair.

A pair of green pennants had been erected at the Chair. The first stagecoach to return to the rodeo grandstands tomorrow, bearing one of the pennants from Devil's Chair as proof that it had made the round trip, would win a silver cup and its driver would be awarded a prize of five hundred dollars in cash.

These recollections lingered on the outer fringe of Grant's thoughts as he followed the dusty road through the Rattlesnakes, his eye concentrating on the twin dust clouds up ahead. He rode with a growing alertness, realizing that Cherry Postell and Vance Degrew might have nervous trigger fingers if they met him unexpectedly on their return trip.

Seared brown hills hemmed in the road as the miles dropped behind the roan's tireless hoofs. The two outlaws were keeping to the road, as the hoofprints of their rented mounts revealed.

In an incredibly short time, Tex Grant rounded a rocky spur and saw the Devil's Chair looming a hundred yards away.

Thirty feet above the level of the road was a flat bench which, when viewed from a certain angle, resembled the seat of a giant chair. The cliff of eroded lava behind the seat was fluted with vertical columns of octagonal basalt, heightening the volcanic formation's resemblance to a chair.

Two silk pennants hung limp from the peeled-pole staffs at the edge of the Chair's seat. At the foot of the lava formation, two empty-saddled horses were grazing the sparse bunch grass beside the road.

Postell and Degrew, then, were somewhere back in the rocks, exploring the landmark, or perhaps resting in the shade before starting their return ride. Or could this be—an ambush trap?

THERE was menace in the air. Grant felt it in the tingle of neck-nape hackles, a grim prescience he could not shake off as he halted his roan alongside the two lather-dripping horses.

He loosened his Winchester in its scabbard under his saddle skirts, eyes raking the eroded jumble of igneous rock for a trace of the two horsemen he had followed out from town.

Scowling puzzedly, the Texan dismounted. A double pair of boot tracks led off in the dust, where Postell and Degrew had walked along the road, out of sight behind the Devil's Chair.

Loosening his Walker .44 in leather, Grant followed the tracks to the foot of the ledge which led up to the rock shelf where the rodeo committee had planted the two pennants in readiness for tomorrow's stagecoach race.

Then, to Grant's straining ears, came a muffled sound of voices, somewhere up above him, followed by a crunch of boots on rubble.

He withdrew behind an outcrop which formed one of the legs of the chair, waiting, his head cocked to locate the sound of voices and moving men. Then he realized that Cherry Postell and Vance Degrew were scrambling their way down the ledge toward the level of the road.

A moment later he saw their shadows waggling against the rock wall on the opposite side of the road. From their angle, Grant was out of sight under a beetling overhang.

Grunting with exertion, the two outlaws clambered their way down the sloping ledge, passing Tex Grant close enough for him to have reached out and touched them.

Reaching the road, they swatted dust from their shirts and turned in the direction of their horses. As they did so, both men caught sight of the Texan standing against the obsidian wall.

Vance Degrew was the first to recover from the surprise of their meeting.

"Well—if it ain't the ex-marshal!" grunted the outlaw who had held up a Silver Exchange down in the Nevada diggings. "Out for a breath of fresh air, Grant?"

The Texan was taking something from the hip pocket of his levis. A pair of folded cardboard rectangles. His eyes were fixed on Cherry Postell's pock-pitted face, analyzing the quick flash of fear he had surprised in the outlaw's bottle-green orbs.

"I was about to ask you hombres the same question," Grant drawled, slapping the two reward posters against his knee to straighten out the creases. "I brought some readin' matter out here that you two might be interested in lookin' over."

As he spoke, Tex Grant scaled the two dodgers onto the ground at the outlaws' feet. They landed printed-side-up, puffing little spurts of alkali dust as they fell.

A gagged oath escaped Degrew's lips

as he recognized his picture on one of the cards. His hand made a blurring movement toward the cedar-butted Navy pistol belted at his flank, but in the act of completing the draw, his hand froze as if locked in a grip of paralysis.

Grant had stepped away from the Devil's Chair, his shadow falling across the squares of cardboard. In the Texan's fist was a six-gun, hammer eared back to full cock, its muzzle weaving like a snake's head to cover the bayed pair.

"I may not be wearin' a star any more," Grant said grimly, "but there's a sheriff over in Prosser who would be interested in sizin' you gents up, I reckon. Turn your backs to me and reach for a cloud, fast."

Mixed emotions played across the faces of the trapped owlhooters. They saw the threat of doom in the black bore of the Colt trained on their briskets, read the ruthless will to shoot in Grant's narrowed eyes.

Then a glance passed between them, and Degrew and Postell raised their arms hatbrim high and turned their backs to Grant.

They're taking it too easy, the Texan told himself, as he stripped the guns from their holsters. *They act as if they got an ace in the hole.*

Grant tossed the pair's guns up on the lava bench which formed the Chair's seat, and stooped to recover the reward posters.

"*'Sta bueno,*" Grant said to them. "Back to the horses."

BACK on the bunchgrass flats, Grant checked to reassure himself that the rented saddles were not carrying booted carbines. Then he took a hank of pigging string from one of his saddle pouches and trussed his captives' wrists behind their backs.

The instinctive hunch that something was wrong grew in the back of Grant's mind as he considered their complete docility. Neither outlaw reviled him with curses or pleaded for mercy. Instead, both men were grinning complacently as he held their stirrups and assisted them to mount. Men who faced hangropes once they had been turned over to the custody of a sheriff would have nothing to grin about.

The premonition that trouble was brewing increased in Grant's subconscious as he mounted, gun palmed, and ordered the pair to head back along the Caprock road. He would have felt easier if he could have roped his prisoners' horses together and dallied the hackamore to his own saddle horn, in the event of an attempted getaway, but he had neglected to bring a coil of lass'-rope with him from town that morning.

Neither outlaw had uttered a word, even between themselves, since their capture. They sat tall in saddle, eyes staring straight ahead, as the arid hills closed in behind them, shutting off their view of the Devil's Chair.

Five miles down the road, Grant knew of a trail which snaked off to the westward in the direction of his own Box G homestead and the seat of Benton County, Prosser. He calculated on reaching the sheriff's office there by mid-afternoon.

When disaster came, it struck with such devastating surprise that Grant had no time to free his legs from stirrups.

Out of nowhere a steel-jacketed .45-70 bullet caught his blue roan in the brisket. The horse dropped, killed instantly, and in falling, its barrel pinioned Grant's left leg to the ground.

The blast of the rifle hit Grant's ears simultaneously with the shouts of his two prisoners as they dived out of saddle and sprinted for the shelter of a boulder pile off the road.

Grant propped himself off the ground with one elbow and thumbed a quick shot at the escaping pair, but missed. Then he realized his own exposed position as the .45-70 roared again, from some remote spot down the road and higher up. The second bullet sprayed dust in his eyes as it hit the clods inches from his shoulder.

Postell and Degrew were out of sight in the rock nest. Grant clawed at the walnut stock of his own Winchester, but the carbine was hopelessly wedged under the dead roan's shoulder. Across the road, the two empty-saddled horses stood dejectedly, showing no signs of spooking.

The hidden Winchester thundered again, the bullet high and wide. The angle of the sun blinded Grant's view of the silhouetted skyline ahead, preventing him from seeing any telltale smudge of gunsmoke which would reveal the ambusher's position. He judged the drygulcher was shooting from a thousand yards' range.

With a grunt of desperation, Grant jerked his pinioned leg. A matter of seconds and the ambusher would correct his range and drill him as he lay, helpless to extricate himself from nine hundred pounds of dead weight.

The throb of old fractures was added to the crushing pressure on his knee and ankle, but a frantic urgency to free himself made the Texan oblivious to the stamping pain as he wedged his free foot against the swellfork pommel to get leverage.

His leg came free by some miracle, leaving the Coffeyville cowboot under Old Blue's carcass. The .45-70 was hammering shots at him as Grant sprinted up the opposite slope to put a ridge between him and the rifleman.

ROCKS and thorny brush tore at his sock-clad foot, leaving a bloody spoor behind him as he lurched his way to a lava outcrop and flung himself to the ground, gasping like a landed fish. A diamondback rattler, sunning himself on the rocks there, buzzed its lethal warning as it snapped itself into a coil. Grant decapitated the reptile with a point-blank shot and replaced the spent shells in his Walker.

There was no mystery about this ambush. The man with the rifle could only be Dev Lucas, he was positive. Lucas, riding out of Caprock to keep some rendezvous with Degrew and Postell at the Devil's Chair. The sure knowledge that they would meet their companion en route accounted, then, for the smug resignation of his two erstwhile captives.

He heard shouts down the road, and pulled himself to his knees for a look. Postell and Degrew had emerged from the rocks and were moving cautiously toward the horses, which were waiting patiently besides the carcass of Old Blue.

Grant lifted his Walker, steadying the barrel on his left forearm, and squeezed off a shot. He saw the puff of dust where the .44 landed, short of the target by yards.

The knowledge that their accomplice's rifle had forced Grant to retreat out of six-gun range released the two outlaws from their cautious advance. Grant groaned helplessly as he saw the two outlaws race down to the horses, catch the trailing bridle reins in their trussed hands, and head out of sight up the road in the direction of the hidden bushwhacker.

A sickening despair clawed at Grant's vitals as he scrambled on up to the crest of the hogback, searching for a suitable spot where he could fort up to stand off a siege in case the three gunhawks elected to close in for the kill.

CHAPTER VI

The Race

HE WAITED a full hour before deciding that Dev Lucas, satisfied with the rescue of his henchmen, had decided not to risk a shoot-out and had withdrawn.

No gunshots broke the quiet of the July afternoon as Tex Grant rounded the shoulder of the ridge and returned to his slain horse. He knelt beside Old Blue, fanning away the predatory flies which had gathered there, and wept unashamed. Old Blue had shared Grant's stormy existence for better than a decade.

He located an old fence post to use for a lever and managed to free his saddle. He cached it in the roadside growth of Russian thistle. Later he would come back and give Old Blue the decent burial he deserved, to shield his horses's remains from coyotes and buzzards.

The sun was westering when Grant tugged on his star boot, shouldered his booted Winchester, and headed back toward town. It would be a gruelling ordeal, a ten-mile hike in stilt-heeled cowboots. It might even be suicidal to walk back in broad daylight, where each turn of the road might expose him to an ambush bullet, but he decided to chance it. . . .

Monday was the Fourth of July and Caprock's false fronts were festooned with gay bunting and the kids started their annual firecracker celebration long before dawn.

The Caprock Stampede got off to a gala start at nine o'clock, with the cowboy band and a hundred Yakima Indians in warbonnets and full tribal regalia leading the grand parade which circled the quarter-mile racetrack in the amphi-

theater of the rodeo grounds.

Tex Grant and Hoptoad Henchley bought seats in the bleachers, too dejected to experience the thrill of the dazzling spectacle which was unfolding before their eyes. The stands were jammed with close onto two thousand people, drawn from as far away as Spokane and Kalispel and the John Day country in Oregon.

All the romance and electric excitement and glamor of the West was here as the preliminary bucking-horse, bulldogging, and calf-roping events got under way.

Senator Zack Wheeler, ludicrous in a ten-gallon hat and gaudy chaps of red goathair, sat in the judge's reviewing stand, announcing the events through a megaphone.

Local buckaroos competed with world champion riders and ropers. The toughest buckers which the Stampede committee had been able to round up from Washington spreads emerged from the chutes with heart-thrilling regularity.

But Tex Grant and his partner sat in a gloomy world of their own, oblivious to the thrills and danger in the arena, the wild enthusiasm of the rodeo crowd engulfing them but failing to touch them.

Hoptoad's woes were mostly the result of having over-indulged in alcoholic spirits all day Sunday. Grant's head was clear, but despondency which had nothing to do with his sore and blistered feet had gripped his spirit.

Not once since his uneventful return to Caprock at four o'clock yesterday afternoon had the Texan glimpsed any trace of Cherry Postell or Vance Degrew. The outlaws, unnerved by their narrow escape, had apparently left for parts unknown.

Marshal Dev Lucas, however, was very much in evidence. He sat between Senator Zack Wheeler and Carola, in the flag-decorated judging stand. Now that he was marshal of Caprock, apparently Lucas had no time to enter the bronc-busting events he had signed up for.

The rodeo took a recess at noon, the crowd milling back down the hill to jam Caprock's eating houses and saloons.

The first event on the afternoon program would be the cross-country stagecoach race, with Tex Grant representing Caprock as driver. His rival would be a veteran Wells Fargo jehu from California, the famous old stage-tooler, Monte Farbin.

The race would start, according to the official program on sale to the spectators, at 2:30 sharp.

THE two Concord coaches which Wheeler had imported from Oregon had been on display all week in Senator Wheeler's front yard. Tex Grant bumped into his rival stage driver, Monte Farbin, during the noon-hour confusion and consented to accompany the famous old jehu over to the Senator's home to inspect the ancient Concords they would drive in the race.

Grant was looking over the bolsters and foot brake of the red-and-yellow vehicle assigned to him when he saw Carola Wheeler emerge from her father's gingerbreaded Victorian mansion and hurry toward him.

There was no dodging the girl. The moment Grant got a close look at her, he realized something was wrong. Carola's face was bleached white, her eyes wide pools of alarm.

"Tex, something awful has happened," Carola greeted him. "Sometime this morning, when everyone was up at the rodeo grounds watching the show, robbers broke into Dad's study and made off with his little iron safe."

Grant felt his throat constrict. This news, somehow, came as no surprise; it was rather as if he had been waiting for something like this to occur. The whole grim pattern of events seemed to have pointed to this news Carola was bringing him.

So that's what Degrew and Postell were up to, he thought.

"And the safe contained your father's $50,000 prize money?"

The girl daubed at her eyes with a silken neck scarf.

"Y-yes. The bandits took safe and all, Tex. Dad discovered the theft when we got back from the rodeo grounds just now."

Grant rubbed his stubbled jaw reflectively. On his few visits to the Senator's private office, he remembered seeing the small combination-lock vault, which was more useful as a fireproof storage box for valuable papers than anything else.

"The bandits have had plenty of time to get out of Caprock with their loot,

of course," Grant said. "But that safe must have weighed three hundred pounds, easy. Too heavy to tote out of town on horseback. The bandits must have had a buckboard."

Carola drew in a long breath.

'The loss of the fifty thousand isn't too imprtant," she said, realizing how her words might sound to Grant. "Dad will pay off the winners, of course. But it—it sort of throws a pall over the festivities."

Hostlers arrived with the two stage teams, hitching the matched spans of Morgans to the two Concords in preparation for entering them in the afternoon parade back to the rodeo grounds.

"Tex," Carola said as he turned to join old Monte Farbin, "I—I just wanted you to know that this robbery wouldn't have occurred if you—if you had still been marshal of Caprock. You'd have posted old Hoptoad to guard our house and the prize money, wouldn't you?"

He shrugged. In view of the circumstances, tracking down clues to the robbery was no concern of his.

Later, with the two Concord stages drawn up in front of the main grandstand, the crowd gave an enthusiastic ovation to the rival drivers, Tex Grant and Monte Farbin. As they mounted to the boot and accepted the lines from the hostlers, Senator Wheeler picked up his megaphone and announced the rules of the cross-country race to the packed stands.

"These coaches will race once around the track here, and then head across the hills toward the Devil's Chair, ten miles north," Wheeler's stentorian voice echoed over the rodeo grounds. "Out at the Devil's Chair we have planted a pair of green pennants, one for each driver to pick up before he starts his return run. The first coach to get back to this reviewing stand and hand me the green pennant will win this handsome silver trophy and also five hundred dollars in cash."

The Senator's next words came as a surprise to Tex Grant.

"Each coach in keeping with tradition, will carry a shotgun guard as well as the driver," Wheeler shouted. "Monte Farbin, of California, will have as his messenger my daughter, Carola. Tex Grant, driving Caprock's entry, will be accompanied by our new marshal, Devroid Lucas, of Denver."

GRANT'S eyes were stony as he saw Carola swing aboard old Farbin's Concord. Then he felt the leather thoroughbraces of his own coach rock under the weight of Dev Lucas, as the black-coated marshal mounted the front wheel and settled himself on the seat beside him.

Whose loco idea was this? Was Lucas scheming to ride with the man he had tried to ambush out on the route of the race less than twenty-four hours ago? The questions hammered at Grant's mind, finding no answer.

Grant snapped himself back to reality as the starter ordered the two drivers to jockey their coaches hub to hub for the start. A hush fell over the crowd as the starter's pistol came up, cracked. Then Grant and Farbin, standing up, lashed their Morgans and the race was on.

Farbin's coach had drawn the inside post and his Concord, with Carola Wheeler clinging to the iron rails of the driver's seat, swept into the lead as the ancient high-wheelers careened around th first turn.

Grant was content to let his team eat Farbin's dust for the quarter-mile oval. The real contest would be decided out in the Rattlesnake Hills, where the stamina of the teams would be put to the test on long grades and dangerous switchbacks.

The grandstands blurred behind them as the two coaches sped down the straightaway and out of the rodeo grounds, to hit the section line road, skid around the turn and head north toward the Devil's Chair.

The two coaches were neck and neck as they topped the first ridge and dipped out of sight of the rodeo crowd. Grant was oblivious to Lucas' presence at his elbow as he slitted his eyes against the dust of Farbin's wheels, lashing his Morgans down the far slope at a full gallop, passing the more cautious veteran.

They sloughed around tight curves at reckless speed, the rickety Concords threatening to capsize under the punishing grind. Six miles out of Caprock, near the spot where Grant had buried Old Blue the night before, Farbin's savvy and skill with the ribbons began to tell and he drew out in front.

For a mile they held their relative positions, and then Grant saw disaster strike the Californian. The right front

wheel of the lead coach suddenly twisted off its axle and bounded like a free hoop off the right of way.

With a harsh yell of dismay, Grant whipsawed his team off the road and stood up to throw his weight on the foot brake as he saw Farbin's stage keel over to grind its axle in the dirt.

Gravel flew like buckshot as Carola Wheeler was thrown out into space, away from the capsizing vehicle. Whipsawing his team with desperate energy, Grant circled the crippled wagon and hauled his team to a halt.

Through the tail of his eye Grant saw Dev Lucas go over the side and slog off through the dust to where Carola had landed in a tumbleweed thicket. Farbin had his hands full fighting his panicked team.

A vagrant breeze cleared the rolling dust clouds as Grant lashed his lines around the whipstock and jumped to the ground. He saw Dev Lucas carrying Carola out of the weed patch and setting her on her feet. Thanks to the cushioning thistles, the girl seemed unhurt.

She was swatting dust from her torn blouse as Grant came up, eyes anxious.

"I'm all right," she gasped, managing a weak grin. 'It's—an awful shame, this accident happening. It spoils the race."

From out of the dust came Monte Farbin's throaty yell:

"Accident, my foot! The couplin' pin was choused out of my hub hut. Somebody with a big stake bet on this race tampered with that wheel—so's yore doggone home-town driver could win!"

Grant saw that the old jehu's accusative eyes were boring at him. He shared Farbin's opinion that the wheel had been purposely loosened before the race, to assure the Caprock coach winning. But somehow Grant didn't believe that gambling was the motive back of the outrage.

"There's no use disappointin' the rodeo crowd," Grant said glumly. "I'll finish the race, Farbin, and you can have the prize money. I entered this race as a civic duty, not because I was after one penny of Senator Wheeler's cash."

CAROLA sensed the sarcasm in his voice. Leaning on Lucas' arm, she turned to the blustering jehu.

"Stay with the team, Mr. Farbin. We'll finish the race out as Tex suggested and I'll send someone back to jack up the coach and get that wheel set back on."

Five minutes later the old Wells Fargo jehu watched the other stagecoach pull back to the road and head on toward the Devil's Chair to pick up the pennants, Carola seated between Grant and the marshal, Dev Lucas.

With no competition pressing him, Grant let the team choose its own gait. No use ganting the Morgans. Maybe when they got back to the Caprock rodeo grounds, he would whip the team into a driving gallop to give the spectators their money's worth.

A storm of conflicting ideas was making Grant's head ache. Events seemed to be following a set pattern. Lucas being assigned to his stage in the role of a pseudo guard, emulating the pioneer custom. Farbin's coach out of the race with a damaged axle. The still-unexplained reason why Postell and Degrew had ridden out Sunday to the halfway mark of the cross-country race, the Devil's Chair.

When they reached the lava rock formation where the green pennants whipped lazily in the hot breeze, Grant hauled his Morgans up and set the brake.

"Hold the team, Carola. Dev, you're comin' with me. We'll fetch back a pennant apiece."

Lucas' coal-black eyes contracted.

"You're the driver, Grant," he protested. "Why should I work up a sweat in this heat, clamberin' up those rocks?"

Knots of muscle played in the corners of Grant's jaws. "I said you're comin' with me, Lucas," he cut in. "Or else Carola will get a chance to see which of us is the better man in a knock-down and drag-out brawl."

CHAPTER VII

Double Deal

CAROLA stared at him, at a loss to comprehend his intelligence. Dev Lucas shrugged, grinning indulgently at the girl.

"No call for makin' a scene," he said patronizingly. "As for the best man business—I believe Carola has already formed her opinions on that score."

The two men climbed down off the stage on opposite sides and met in front of the team, heading shoulder to shoulder toward the defile where the road looped behind the Devil's Chair.

Rounding the base of the lava formation, out of sight of the girl on the stage behind them, Lucas whirled to face Grant, his hand making a twitching motion toward the Colt at his hip.

Grant didn't attempt a draw. He lunged at his adversary, whipping out a rock-knuckled fist which crashed against the side of Lucas' jaw and hammered him against the basalt cliff.

He followed with a hard-driving kick to send Lucas' drawn gun clattering against the rocks. Then, grabbing the man's lapel with his left arm, Grant smashed Lucas' handsome face with savage chopping uppercuts, pulping his nose and lips, closing one eye.

No word had passed between them, and Lucas was a bleeding cartoon of his former handsome self when Grant's fury spent itself and he stepped back, stooping to pick up Lucas' gun.

"We got a lot to settle between us, Dev," Grant panted hoarsely, rubbing a bloody fist against his shirt. "That business of Ace Crockett, your bushwhackin' my blue roan up the road yesterday. We'll get to that later."

Quivering in every muscle, swaying on his feet, Dev Lucas spat out a broken tooth and fumbled in his pocket for a bandanna.

"I don't know—what you're talkin' about," he panted hoarsely.

Tex Grant drew his Walker .44. A six-gun in either hand, he gestured toward the sloping ledge which gave access to the seat of the Chair and the two green pennants.

"Get movin', Lucas. You're goin' up after those flags."

Lucas stared at the unwavering gun muzzles trained on his chest, and leaned back against the basalt wall, shaking his head dazedly.

"No. I—I'm in no shape to climb, blast you."

Grant laughed harshly, shooting a quick look up to the crest of the lava-rocks.

"You mean you're *afraid* to climb up there, Lucas? Knowin' that Vance Degrew and Cherry Postell are planted up on the Chair Back, waitin' to ambush the stage driver when he shows his head over the rim of the seat?"

The color drained from Lucas' battered face and terror replaced the anger in his swollen eyes.

"You're loco," gasped the new marshal of Caprock. "Plumb batty. Why would Degrew and Postell be here at Devil's Chair?"

Grant thumbed both of his six-shooters to full cock.

"I ain't completely sure," he said. "Unless it would be that your two owlhoot friends carried the Senator's little safe outdoors this mornin' and found it too heavy to manage. So they might have cached it on board my Concord, knowin' you'd fix it so my stage would be the only one to show up at Devil's Chair. What better way to get their loot out of town—especially with you ridin' guard on it?"

Grant was nearing the frazzled end of his patience. He jerked his head toward the ledge.

"Start climbing, Lucas!" he ordered harshly. "If my hunch is wrong, you got nothin' to worry about in showin' yourself over the rim of the seat."

Lucas was facing the alternative of leaden death from Grant's twin guns. He turned, stumbling toward the rocky shelf which slanted up to the Devil's Chair seat.

Foot by foot, goaded by the menace of Grant's jutting sixes, Lucas crawled up the face of the lava wall. Then they were on a flat outcrop, the base of the flagstaffs only ten feet away now, three feet above the level of Lucas' crouching body.

"Go on, Lucas. Show your head over the top."

Bunching his shoulders, Dev Lucas reached up to grip the rim of the Chair's seat with palsied hands. A shrill scream came from his lungs as he started to rise:

"Cherry—Vance! Don't shoot! It's me—Dev!"

THE marshal's panicked entreaty was cut off by the sharp flat whipcrack of a gunshot as his forehead topped the skyline. His skull pierced dead center of the forehead by a .30-30 slug, Lucas toppled back against Tex Grant, then somersaulted backwards over the ledge.

Grant's eyes remained on the skyline above the narrow bench, his ears telling him that Lucas' corpse was bounding soddenly down the ledge like a sack full

of loose bones, to land with grisly, terminal impact on the road twenty feet below.

Squatting on his haunches, guns thrust ahead of him, Grant kept his eyes shuttling along the sharp-etched rim of the Chair seat between the flagpoles and the basalt columns of the Chair's forty-foot back. Waiting for Act Two of the grim drama being enacted here.

He raised himself to a knee-bent standing position, his eyes above the level of the Chair seat, in time to see two figures emerge from an eroded cavity in the Chair Back. Vance Degrew and Cherry Postell, carrying out the last phase of a cunningly-conceived and daringly-executed piece of banditry.

The two outlaws spotted Grant's head at the same instant—a pair of flint-bright eyes under a Stetson brim, his head bracketed by two six-gun muzzles thrust over the rim.

Postell jerked up his Remington .30-30, but too late. Grant's right-hand gun spat flame and recoiled sharply away from the rock. And the fugitive dope-smuggler from the Border caved at the knees, Grant's slug tunneling his pock-scarred cheekbone.

Degrew was fanning his triggerless Colt with the heel of his other hand, backing toward the shelter of their ambush. Grant's Walker .44 roared, his shot high on the shoulder, spinning Degrew around and tripping him on his own spurs. Grant fired his second shot with cold precision, his bullet entering Degrew's throat and tearing on through to ricochet off the hexagonal lava pillars beyond.

That finished it. Wind cleared away the gunsmoke, the smell of blood and powder. Grant hauled down the two rodeo pennants and stuffed them under the waistband of his levis. He heard a rumble of wagon wheels rounding the Chair below him and knew Carola had seen the climactic gunplay up on the Seat.

"Tex! Te-e-ex!" Carola screamed, as she fought leaders, swingspan, and wheelers to a halt alongside Lucas' mashed, ghastly form. "Are you all right up there, Tex? Did they—hurt you?"

A voice started singing inside Tex Grant as he started working his way down the ledge path. *Her first thought was for me, not Lucas,* the song went.

She stepped off the front wheel into his arms as he reached the road, their lips meeting hungrily in their first kiss.

"Darling Tex," she whispered under his ear, clinging to him. "To think I brought Dev Lucas back to Caprock because the only interest I could ever stir in you, the only response, was when Dev was courting me. Can you know how much I loved you to resort to—"

"Stop it. Carola," he cut in harshly. "This is no good."

She saw his face harden, felt him push her away. Stalking in gloomy silence to the door of the Concord, he jerked it open and looked inside, then went around to the back and unlaced the ancient canvas curtain which shielded the baggage compartment.

Hidden there under a pile of reasty gunnysacks was Senator Wheeler's small iron safe, its combination dial undamaged, the rodeo sweepstakes money intact.

"Not a bad idea, at that," Carola heard him muse, as he let her see the black iron vault. "Deprew and Postell would have knocked me off when I went up for the pennant, then come down here and put a drop on Dev Lucas. With you here as witness to the fact that Lucas couldn't have had any part in the robbery, he'd have been in the clear."

He turned to the girl then, putting his rope-calloused hands on her shoulders.

"About—us," he said. "It's no dice, Carola. I'm just a mercenary star-toter, tryin' to get a stake to build up my little two-bit homestead up the river. You're used to soft livin', to the luxuries I could never provide you. You've been through college—"

SHE smiled through sudden tears. "But I majored in home economics, Tex. Must I be penalized because my father happens to be rich?"

He helped her up on the stage, picked up the lines and swung the Morgans around in the direction of Caprock.

"It won't go, Carola," he repeated doggedly. "This ain't one of them novels you get at the library, where the poor beggar wins the princess. This is real life. I can't picture you a homesteader's wife."

They picked up old Monte Farbin on the way back and Grant slipped off the stagecoach at the turn-off which led to the rodeo grounds, leaving to the old

Wells Fargo jehu the glory of making a break-neck dash down between the grandstands, with Carola waving a victorious green pennant, the crowd roaring its tumultous approval.

By prearranged plan, Hoptoad Henchley was waiting for Grant down by the livery barn. He had his Nellie mare saddled and a buckskin rigged with Old Blue's saddle for Grant's ride up the river to the Box G homestead.

"I'm glad our lawin' days are over, son," the old Ranger commented, as they jogged out of town. "We'll find some peace and quiet out there on the Sweetwater, I reckon."

It was peaceful enough on the Box G, with plenty of hard work to keep a man's mind off himself daytimes and to produce good solid sleep at night. Fences to build, a well to bore, hay to get in, wood to chop against the winter's needs.

They had their first visitors the following Sunday, when two riders topped the rise from the direction of Caprock. At the bosque of cottonwoods where Grant's fence corner joined Henchley's section, one of the riders halted in the shade while the other continued on down to the house.

As he dismounted by the front gate, Grant and Hoptoad, busy soaping their saddles on the porch of the cabin, recognized their visitor as the Baptist minister from town.

"Howdy, reverend," Grant called out. "Didn't know you rode so far afield to check up on sinners breakin' the Sabbath."

The Reverend Silas Peabody mopped his fat cheeks with a bandanna as he came up to the shade of the porch and shook hands.

"Matter of fact, I am here in the capacity of a chaperone, you might say," the sky pilot admitted, drinking copiously from a dipper of cold water. "That's Carola Wheeler with me back yonder. She wasn't sure she would find a welcome here."

Grant stared at the figure on the coal black Arabian stud down by the cottonwoods, too amazed for speech. Not so Henchley.

"I'll rattle old Nellie's hocks down there and show that sp'iled young she-cat if she's welcome on this spread!" the ex-Ranger fumed, curbing his profanity in deference to the minister. "Why, I'll show that brazen filly—"

Grant seized the old man's arm and pulled him back. His own mouth was grim as he headed out to the gate where Reverend Peabody's horse was waiting.

"I'll send her packin' back where she came from, Hoptoad," Grant called back. "Just watch me."

Wearily, Reverend Peabody sought the welcome shade of the house as Grant rode toward the cottonwoods at a pounding gallop.

Staring after him, a wicked grin under his soiled mustache, Hopstoad Henchley watched as he saw Grant rein up in a flurry of dust alongside the girl's Arabian.

But when the dust settled, it revealed an incomprehensible thing. Grant had pulled Carola Wheeler bodily out of saddle and was holding her so close that at this distance, they merged as one on the preacher's horse.

"It looks as if I didn't have this long ride out here for nothin, after all," Reverend Peabody beamed, fanning himself with his hat. "I presume you'll act as best man at the nuptial ceremony, Mr. Henchley?"

THE disillusion and disgust ebbed slowly from the Ranger's rheumy orbs as he watched Grant and the girl, riding double, coming down the homestead lane.

Behind them the black Arabian trotted, muzzle questing the breeze. Out by the gate, Hoptoad's dun mare whickered ecstatically.

The old Ranger shuffled his way out to the gate and thrust an arm around the mare's skinny neck.

"Can't even trust you any more, eh, Nellie?" he accused the mare dolefully. Then, watching the oncoming Arab, a happy thought struck him. "Yuh'll be mighty proud with a half-Arab foal, Nellie girl. Right proud. Yessir, there may be somethin' to this j'inin' of blue blood and common range stock, at that. Mebbe Tex has got the right idea after all."

And Hoptoad was grinning a broad welcome when Carola slid out of Grant's arms at the front gate.

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Next Issue: THE BORDER PATROL, a Novelet by William Hopson

. . . who helps himself

By SAMUEL MINES

Old Amos Chaffin applies his philosophy once too often!

OLD Amos Chaffin was the richest cattleman in the Strawberry River country. He was also the most grasping, which was why he was the richest.

"The Lord helps them as helps themselves," was his favorite remark, his badge, his shield and his defiance. And rare was the day that he did not apply the principles of this philosophy.

The other cowmen, smaller operators for the most part, disliked to deal with Amos, but it was a wild country where banks were unknown and money scarce and there were times when no other course offered. So it came about that August Weller, a two-bit rancher from one of Strawberry's numerous tributaries, rode up to Chaffin's CU ranch to make business palaver.

"Amos," said Weller nervously, "my hay crop's gone and I'm goin' to need winter feed. Could you see your way clear to lettin' me have two hundred dollars for feed? I'd give you the reg'lar rates of interest."

Keeping him stewing for a while, Amos chewed his tobacco and let his eyes stray out over the distant blueness of the Uinta peaks. He had learned the effectiveness of silence, of making a man wait, knowing what it did to the nerves. Finally he spat and made answer.

"Nope, Weller, I reckon I couldn't."

"Why not?" August said anxiously.

"Don't callate that two-bit spread of yours is a good risk."

Weller's shoulders sagged. Hopelessness rode him like a nightmare.

"I got to have feed," he said despairingly. "If I don't I'm licked—might as well quit."

"That's however," Amos said. "Tell you what I will do, Augie. I'll give you six hundred dollars for your place."

"Six hundred! Why she's worth fifteen hundred easy!"

"Not to me she ain't. Six hundred."

It was bitterly apparent to August Weller that if Amos Chaffin had $600 to pay for his ranch, he had $200 to lend him. And he knew then the measure of the man with whom he dealt. Stiff-backed he rode away, leaving Chaffin still chewing his tobacco and gazing distantly out toward the blue Uinta range.

In a week August Weller was back, his spine not so stiff. He was licked.

"I'll take the six hundred," he said, lips trembling, and handed over his deed.

AMOS CHAFFIN accepted the deed and counted out six hundred dollars in grimy bills. This done, a great unhappiness seized him. August Weller had $600. This was unjust, unfair and inequitable. He had the Weller ranch, but he yearned for that lovely bundle of cash as well. Why should a misfit incompetent fool like Weller go out and waste that money as he surely would, when a smart businessman could put it to so much better use? Amos Chaffin cleared his throat.

"Augie," he said, "I got a mind to do something for you."

"Huh? What?"

"Well, you got no ranch now, you need something to do. You'd ought to go into business with that money you just got."

"Such as?"

"You know my place down at Twin Forks?"

This was a saloon Chaffin had built when Twin Forks showed some promise of becoming a town—a promise that was never kept. Twin Forks remained just a cross road with only an occasional puncher, Indian or sheepherder passing by and the amount of liquor sold there would scarcely have taxed a sparrow to fly in.

Chaffin leaned forward.

"This country's building up," he said. "Twin Forks is goin' to be a town pretty soon. Now's your chance, Augie, to get that place at the bottom price. I ain't got time for it with my ranch and all, but a man like you, with nothin' else on his mind, could take hold of that little bar and make it the social center of this here country. Why Augie—"

He dazzled the ex-cattleman's vision with images of a bustling crowd, a thriving town, settlers pouring in, cowboys from nearby ranches thronging Weller's bar, all ordering lavishly and a white-aproned Augie hustling frantically behind the bar to keep up with the orders.

"You can have it for five hundred dollars—that's givin' it away, and have a hundred left to lay in a stock of whisky. It's a mighty fine opportunity, son."

A little later August Weller was five hundred dollars poorer and the owner of the only saloon in Twin Forks. He departed in a daze, his head filled with visions of wealth.

Amos Chaffin watched him go with satisfaction, the $500 rustling gratifyingly in his pocket. He was generous, he did not begrudge Augie the $100 he carried off. Amos was generous to a fault—in Amos' opinion.

Time passed. He did not visit Twin Forks, but from passing cow punchers he heard that Augie had pitched in to clean, repair and refurbish the dingy building he had bought until it was spotless and shining. He had ordered a supply of liquor and some white aprons and he stood behind the bar and waited for customers.

"Let him wait." Amos grinned to himself. And mentally he began to calculate what he would offer Augie for his barrels of whisky when that bad guesser finally gave up and admitted he was licked again.

There came a day when a dust covered rider came out of the east and stopped at Chaffin's ranch. Amos groaned when he saw the cowboy ride up, for the law of the range made hospitality unavoidable and Amos saw in the stranger only a hungry mouth to eat his food. However, there was no way out of it, it was unthinkable to turn away a visitor.

At dinner the cowboy waxed loquacious. "Reckon your range is goin' to grow up pronto," he remarked.

"That so? What do you mean?"

"I mean wagon trains. Biggest wagon trains I ever see in my life headin' this way. Feller told me they was aimin' to take up claims right in this territory. Said there's more trains behind them. Folks from back in Illinois, he said."

Wagon trains, settlers! The wheels began to spin in Amos Chaffin's head. And one clear-cut idea emerged above all else. That worthless saloon he had sold Augie Weller would suddenly become a gold mine. Twin Forks would truly blossom into a town after its years of sleep, and business would boom. He had made a mistake in letting that place slip through his fingers.

Amos Chaffin was a man of action. Next day he saddled his pinto and rode to Twin Forks. He found Augie Weller, in spotless apron, polishing the bar and waiting for customers.

"How you makin' out?" Amos asked, buying a drink.

"You're my first customer today," Augie admitted.

Amos sipped his whisky. "Slow, eh? "I didn't callate on that, Augie. Maybe I done you—not meanin' to, of course. I wouldn't want to do an old friend, so if'n you want to back out, why I'll give you yore money back."

"Didn't say I wanted to back out," Augie disclaimed.

"You said business was slow."

"Yeh. But there was a puncher through here yes'day, said there was three four big wagon trains with settlers headin' for this country. Reckon I'll hang on and see what comes of it."

"Rumors!" Amos scoffed. "You can't believe these fiddle-footed chuck line riders! He mebbe saw a sheepherder's wagon and made it into a train."

Augie merely shrugged and continued polishing the bar.

"Nope, Augie," Amos said, "my conscience is plumb uneasy about stickin' you with this *casa*. Here, let me give you back your five hundred and take the place off your hands."

Augie rubbed the bar. "I dunno," he said. "Reckon I ought to hang on."

"Oh, I see," Amos said. "Thinkin' that just gettin' back your money don't leave you no better off, huh? Well, mebbe you are entitled to somethin' for the business you might've done. Tell you what. I'm a generous man, Augie, I'll give you six hundred to make up the time you done lost down here."

"Nope," said Augie stubbornly.

"Seven hundred. That's a mighty liberal offer, *amigo*."

"Nope."

"Eight hundred," said Amos, beginning to sweat. "Not a peso more."

"I reckon not."

Amos got the place finally for $1500. He got chills and fever every time he thought of it, but he figured it was worth it. The saloon was the only one in the whole section and when those settlers' trains arrived it would be a bonanza.

He watched Augie Weller ride off, counting his money laboriously. "Know where there's a right nice ranch I can get for this," Augie was muttering. "Better'n my old one."

Amos sighed. He hated to see all that money going out of his life, but he had the saloon back, that was the most important thing. He put on Augie's white apron and began polishing the bar, waiting for customers.

Two weeks later, the first covered wagon tops, like the sails of ships, appeared over the horizon. Amos' excitement knew no bounds. So it was true! The settlers were coming! The wagons came on in an awe-inspiring stream. There seemed to be hundreds of them. And presently there was much excitement in the Strawberry River country and the high plateau to the west. Settlers staked claims, broke ground; began to put up homes. Amos Chaffin ordered $500 worth more of whisky freighted in and congratulated himself on his business acumen.

But the days went by and no customers approached the Twin Forks saloon. He polished the bar and peered out toward the horizons while a dreadful fear began in his breast and gnawed at his heart. Where was everybody?

AS THE days stretched into a week he could stand the suspense no longer. He saddled his pinto and rode toward the distant settlement where the plowed lines of the new farms broke the virgin sage. And he met Augie Weller, riding alone and looking at peace with the world.

"Howdy," Weller said. "I done bought me the old Pitchfork spread. Right nice place, good feeders—"

"Have you been down to the settlement?" Amos demanded eagerly. "Seen the emigrants?"

"Sure 'nough. Right nice folks, if they are a mite queer some ways. You take their wives—"

"I ain't seen hide nor hair of any of them," Amos said breathlessly. "They ain't come near my place. I figgered—what ails them folks, Augie?"

Weller gave him a queer look. "Why, ain't you heard, Amos?"

There was something about his tone that sent icy tongues of dread splintering through Amos Chaffin's middle.

"Heard what, Augie?"

"*Tsk, tsk,*" said Augie shaking his head. "It's a plumb shame I reckon. Them folks ain't goin' to come near your place, Amos. They're Mormons. Ain't you heard? They're plumb forbidden to drink hard liquors. A drap o' wine mebbe, but corn liquor—hey, Amos, don't faint!"

But it was too late. Amos Chaffin had been wounded in his only vulnerable spot—his pocketbook.

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BLOOD MONEY

CHAPTER 1

Yellowback Murder

THE battered old stagecoach of "Magpie" Stevens was hitched and ready for the rugged sixty-mile down-trip to Painted Post. His last duty before pulling out of Cottonwood, on the twice-weekly schedule, was to call at Bascom's Store to pick up the mailbag and whatever small freight was wanted down Indian County way.

The grizzled, gap-toothed old stage driver groped for the order list in his gee-side hip pocket as he clumped up the steps and entered. Grunting a greeting, he slapped the list on the counter, then stepped to the pot-bellied stove and embraced its warmth while "Baldy" Bascom propped on his specs and scanned the various items.

Bascom ran a grimy finger down the list until it came opposite words that made him stare, read them again, then make a clucking sound with his tongue.

"Dang my eyes, but this is a hard order to fill!" he exclaimed.

"What is?" Magpie asked over his shoulder, still hugging the stove.

Bascom leaned an elbow on the counter and scrutinized the list closer. "It says

By TOM GUNN

A hundred-dollar bill causes a storekeeper's death and sets the law of Painted Post on the killer's trail of treachery!

Kinsey went under as the sheriff's Colt roared

here," he declared, stabbing the item with his forefinger, " 'six dozen mousetraps.' Yep, that's what it says."

Then he straightened, both hands propped on the counter. "Mind tellin' me who wants six dozen mousetraps?" he demanded.

Magpie turned, back to the stove. "All I know," he retorted grumpily, "is that I'm errand boy for everybody between here and the border. I lug about everything that's ate, drank, wore or otherwise made use of in southern Arizona. Nuthin' surprises me, not anymore. As for them six dozen mousetraps, I ain't got the slightest notion who they're for. Me, I warn't around when that blamed list was made up. Ain't got 'em, huh?"

"Ain't a store west o' Chicago that's got six dozen mousetraps," declared Bas-

com. "But then, I always manage to fill the bill, somehow."

"Got something just as good, that what yuh mean?"

Bascom ran a thoughtful hand over his polished dome. "Yep, by jigger, I have!" he decided suddenly. "Cheaper, too. I'll supply a free substitute, for that matter."

"Speakin' of prices and such," said Magpie, stepping to the counter and reaching into his pocket again, "here's something that Judge Bertram told me to hand yuh on account."

He flipped a crinkly-new one hundred dollar bill in front of the storekeeper. Bascom clucked his tongue again.

"By jigger, there ain't many o' these!" he said, picking the yellowback up and examining it. "First I've seen in months."

It was the first that Magpie ever had seen. Hundred-dollar bills weren't commonly in circulation. Tossing out such important-sized money made him feel chesty.

"Well then, hustle up that order and load 'er up, along with the mail, Baldy," he ordered.

HE LEFT the store, ducking his head to a cold gust as he crossed the dust-blown street to the depot lunchroom. There he grabbed a quick cup of coffee. When he got back, Bascom was loading the last of the mail and supplies in the old Concord coach that stood in front of the store. This completed, he paused on the store porch, where he studied the yellowback again.

"Look, Magpie, the upper right corner is tore off," he said. "Reckon this money's still good?"

"Good as gold. It's a habit of Judge Bertram's tuh nip a corner offen paper money. He allows as how it's good luck."

"Good luck for who?"

Magpie didn't say. Bundling the fleece-lined collar of his windbreaker around his skinny, seamed neck, he swung up to the driver's perch. He gathered the reins and laid hold of the whip. The rawhide lash exploded over the leader's ears. The six-horse team came to life with a leap. The old stagecoach creaked and lurched forward. With a whoop in the wind, Magpie was borne away from Bascom's and out of town, the loose-spoked wheels rattling as he bounced southward across a hog-wallowy plain of catclaw and blue sage.

Still fingering the money, Baldy Bascom re-entered the store. Behind the counter, he reached to open the cash till. It was then he became suddenly aware of another's presence. Over by the glowing stove stood a silent customer. Customer? Bascom saw a leap of greed in his narrowed eyes as they fastened on the money, the golden hue of which denoted its large denomination.

The man was hard-faced, roughly-dressed and unshaven. He wore a Colt weighted holster low on his right thigh. His hand went to it as he made a quick stride forward.

No word was uttered. There was threat enough in the stranger's action and in his eyes. From an under-counter shelf beside the cash till, Bascom whipped a handy-sized six-gun. As he brought it to a level aim, the other's Colt jarred the crowded shelves and belched smoke across the counter to a round hole drilled through the storekeeper's heart.

Bascom's face wore a death-daze as he swayed forward. With the spark of life left in him, he triggered. His killer whirled at the impact of lead that grooved his ribs.

Then Bascom, with an expiring sigh, fell face down across the counter. There he was found, about a half-hour later. The cash till was open and empty. The hundred dollar bill was gone. Nobody remembered seeing a roughly-dressed stranger lope out of town on a shaggy buckskin. He travelled south, the buckskin's hoofs leaving a streamer of alkali dust. South towards the Border. . . .

Magpie's relay station was at lonely Box L Springs, about halfway between Cottonwood and Painted Post. There he changed to a fresh team, as usual. While hooking the traces of the wheel horses, he became sharply aware of a sound that seemed to come from inside the stagecoach. He cocked his head sidewise and heard it again.

"Either I'm gettin' hill-silly or that's the mewin' of a cat!" he said aloud.

Cramming a wad of fine-cut chewing into his mouth, Magpie went to a door of the passenger compartment and yanked it open. No passengers this trip. But the interior was piled with goods from Bascom's Store. On the back seat rested a small crate. There was a movement behind the slats. Again the plead-

ing lament sounded. Magpie's grizzled jaw sagged. His eyes rounded until he felt his hatband tighten across his lifted brow. Then he exploded a hearty cuss-word, coupling it with the name of Baldy Bascom.

Magpie was still sputtering to himself when he pulled into Painted Post about dark. He came down the last stretch of road, past the feed corral and the jail, with a flourish of speed. The stage brakes screeched shrilly as he hauled to a stop in the middle of the raw little cowtown, in front of the Painted Post Saloon.

The brakes gave signal of his arrival to the small group that waited inside Thimble Jack's place. They poured past the swinging, slatted doors to the platform sidewalk—the slick-haired, sad-eyed bartender, "Dictionary" Smith, the town character, ruddy, white-haired Judge John Bertram and his dapper, goateed crony, Doc Crabtree, and red-haired, runty Deputy Sheriff "Shorty" Watts.

Apart from them, lean and tall in a spotted calfskin vest, came the Sheriff of Painted Post, Blue Steele. He was first to notice Magpie's unusual agitation as he hopped down from the high spring seat.

"I'll learn that egg-headed ol' galoot that I ain't fond of practical jokes!" he fumed.

"Meanin' who?" chirped Shorty Watts.

"Bascom, dang him!"

"What's the joke, Magpie?"

WITH a snort, the stage driver yanked open the Concord, dived in and emerged with the small crate in his arms.

"A she-cat with four danged kittens!" he stormed. "He slipped 'em in here unbeknownst to me!"

He plunked the crate disgustedly on the sidewalk planks.

"I'll bust this danged cage over his danged head, cats an' all, on my next danged up-trip!" vowed Magpie.

Doc Crabtree rolled a cold cheroot to a corner of his mouth and his sharp-pointed nose wrinkled with distaste.

"Cats, huh!" he rasped. "Get rid of 'em, somebody! Cats pack germs! Covered with 'em!"

"Yuh don't say!" breathed Shorty, stooping beside the crate and peering into it. The mother cat gave a small, pitiful mew. Shorty poked a finger between the slats. She rubbed her face against it.

"You find three hundred and one breeds of micro-organisms on cats!" huffed Doc Crabtree.

"That so?" It was Blue Steele's amused drawl. "Lug 'em inside, then, *segundo,* where Doc can count 'em for us."

The little deputy hoisted up the crate, and thrusting the batwing doors apart with it, he carried it into the lighted saloon and set it on the bar. Magpie followed with the mailbag, the others behind him.

"Here's another thing that don't strike me as a dang bit funny!" complained Magpie as he crammed a fresh wad of finecut into his mouth. "Who sent for six dozen mousetraps?"

"Why, that was on Chow Now's order," said Thimble Jack.

Chow Now ran Painted Post's only eating place, across the street from the jail.

Dictionary Smith, shy and shrivelly, rubbed one canvas-legginged shin against the other. "That's bad," he said mildly. "Awful bad."

"What's bad about it?" boomed Judge Bertram.

"Well, what d'you imagine our Chinese friend expects to do with all the mice he catches with six dozen mousetraps?"

"S'pose you tell us!" Bertram rumbled.

Dictionary fidgeted before the Judge's scowl.

"Well, d'you ever wonder what odd and unusual chopped-up ingredients Orientals use in chow mein, for instance?" he faltered.

The Judge's ruddy glow faded to a sickish hue.

"Migosh!" gulped Shorty. "Yuh figger the ol' highbinder aims to feed us on—on mice?"

"They're a Chinese delicacy, I'm told," Dictionary nodded solemnly.

"Fuddle duddle!" cried Doc Crabtree. "And yet, you can't tell about that old smarty!"

"Mice—ugh! I've plumb lost my appetite for supper!" muttered Shorty.

The sheriff listened quietly, his gray eyes veiling his thoughts, but with the ghost of a smile on his rugged, bronzed face.

"I reckon there's an easy explanation

to the mousetrap mystery," he said. "But that can wait."

As he spoke, his strong hands clasped a slat of the crate on the bar and pulled it off. The cat promptly squirmed out. He reached in and freed the four kittens. They were just at the clumsy, playful stage, about six weeks old. But they weren't playful now. They tagged their mother hungrily the length of the bar.

"The problem is, what are we going to feed these weaners?" Steele said, capturing one and snuggling it against him.

"Cats don't drink whisky, I'm told," said Dictionary.

"I'll furnish the chloroform!" growled Doc Crabtree.

"Yuh will not!" Shorty yelped indignantly. "I'll chase over tuh Chow Now's right now and if he's stewin' up a mess o' mice, that's good cat vittles."

"Looks like they're wished onto me," Thimble Jack said gloomily. "Can't yuh use a kitten or two out at T Bar T, Judge?"

"Might," Bertram replied doubtfully. "Remains to be seen if they're pets—or pests."

CHAPTER II

Bloodstained Shirt

CASUALLY they dismissed the cat subject, as Thimble Jack opened the mailbag and started distributing the contents. Magpie, with Dictionary's help, unloaded the freight from Bascom's, then turned the stage team up to the feed corral. Shorty, back from Chow Now's eatery with a can of milk and handful of meat scraps, amused himself by feeding the famished feline family on the bar—to Doc Crabtree's outspoken disgust.

Judge Bertram buttonholed Steele and drew him over to a corner card table.

"Sit down, Sheriff," he said, kicking back two chairs and settling heavily into one of them. "I've got some bad news."

Steele's attention seemed to be concentrated on the brown paper cigarette he was twisting shut. Flinging a sideglance across at Shorty Watts, Bertram leaned closer and lowered his rumbling voice to a near-whisper.

"Thunderation, I don't like sayin' it, Sheriff. But Indian County folks, they're hollerin' about taxes. We got to pare down expenses somehow. Things have been quiet hereabouts, lately. The opinion is, you can handle law enforcement in this bailiwick yourownself."

Steele struck a sulphur match under the table. "Go on, Judge."

Bertram's bluff, impulsive face showed distress. "Good Godfrey, I know how yuh feel towards the little segundo!" he blurted. "He's been yore right hand, sure! But it's the kidlike ways he has that makes folks think he ain't busy enough! Look at him now, playin' with cats! S'posen somebody should walk in and see—"

The words were barely out of Bertram's mouth when the batwing doors swung open and a rough-garbed, unshaven man barged in, his small, restless eyes blinking in the light that flooded from the big kerosene lamp that hung above the bar.

But the arrival was not a critical, complaining taxpayer. He was a stranger in Painted Post. He nodded curtly at the pair by the card table, his gaze lingering on the silver badge on Steele's calfskin vest, then lowering to the twin Colts buscaderoed at the sheriff's lean middle. Steele's rock-gray eyes studied the newcomer as he cupped the lighted match to his cigarette.

The stranger's eyes flicked away to the bar and the row of wet goods on the mirrored shelf behind it. They drew him like a magnet. He made an impatient motion. Thimble Jack shoved out a bottle and glass. The other poured a brimming drink and tossed it down, then another.

Steele's keen eyes, shadowed by his hat brim, watched the man without seeming to do so. Then the latter spoke. He addressed Doc Crabtree, puffing huffily at his cheroot, one elbow on the bar.

"What do people in these parts do in case of accident?" His voice was horse and uneven, with a hollow tone.

The Doc's pince-nez specs flashed towards him. "If it's a bad accident," he said, "we most generally bury 'em, pronto. In milder cases—"

"Doc Crabtree, here, gives 'em medicine and then we bury' em." Shorty

Watts grinned.

The stranger poured himself another slug. He drank with his left hand, Steele noticed, though he wore his six-gun on his right thigh.

"Join me, Doc?" croaked the man, shoving the bottle in Crabtree's direction. Thimble Jack spun out another glass. Just then Magpie and Dictionary returned from the corral. The stage driver's ire had subsided a little.

"Say Judge," he jabbered, "yuh should of seen Bascom when I sprung that hundred-dollar bill on him. I bet he's pawin' it over yet."

The stranger's third drink halted, halfway to his mouth. A little liquor spilled over his unsteady hand.

"That'll be two bucks, even," Thimble Jack said.

"Keep score, Barkeep. I ain't done yet," the man retorted bruskly. "Also, is there a place in town where a man kin hole up overnight?"

"There's an empty room upstairs. That'll cost you—"

"I didn't ask how much!" the other interrupted sharply. "Yuh got a swamper that'll put up my hawse?"

"That means you," Thimble Jack said, snapping his fmgers at Dictionary.

"It's the buckskin out at the hitchrail. Don't water him too much and feed him good and plenty," ordered the man at the bar.

"You were speaking about some accident," Doc Crabtree reminded him.

"Forget it," the stranger said shortly. "Show me that upstairs room, Birdlegs," he told Dictionary.

"You sign the register first."

This came from the sheriff and it was so unexpected that Thimble Jack showed his surprise plainly. The stranger swung around.

"That customary?" he shot at the sheriff.

"How about other hotels you've stopped at?"

EVERYBODY was listening now. They all knew that Thimble Jack had no such thing as a hotel register. He still looked blankly at Steele. Shorty got the play. He didn't have the slightest idea why Steele wanted the man to register. But he did know that the Sheriff had some motive in springing the unusual request. So the little deputy stood on the foot rail, reached across the bar and laid hold of an account book that Thimble Jack kept on the back bar.

He flipped it open to an unused page and laid it before the stranger.

"Slide out pen and ink to the man," he told the bartender.

Dazedly Thimble Jack obeyed. The stranger glared at Shorty. He swayed a little and seemed on the point of refusal. Then, with a disdainful gesture he thrust the pen in the ink, leaned over the account book and began to write.

His hand, the left one, moved awkwardly. Shorty looked over his shoulder as he wrote.

"My name enough or d'yuh want my pedigree?" he sneered at Steele.

"Where from," Steele said. "Put that down too."

The left hand returned to the page. The man's lips moved with the effort at writing. Then he flung the pen down.

"Supper's about set over at Chow Now's, mister," suggested Dictionary.

"Yeah? Then go eat it! Just show me that batcave where I'm supposed tuh sleep!"

The man tossed down another hurried drink before he swayed after the little handyman, up the narrow stairs that led to the floor above. Booted feet trod heavily in the hallway overhead. The blurred sound of the husky voice could be heard as Dictionary was dismissed. Then a spring cot creaked as Dictionary pattered down.

Steele was at the bar now, examining the still-wet scrawl. "Our friend's name seems to be Bill Kinsey," he drawled softly. "And he claims to be from Phoenix."

"You sound all-fired suspicious!" barked Doc Crabtree.

A wry smile flicked one corner of Steele's mouth.

"It's spelled F-e-n-i-x," he announced, slapping the account book shut. "A mistake that anybody who really lived there isn't likely to make. Also, I'd say that Mister Kinsey, or whoever he might be, isn't used to writing with his left hand."

Doc Crabtree's brow puckered above his sharp nose.

"Accident," he mused. "Hm-mm. I wonder now if—hey there, scat!"

The mother cat, having finished with what Shorty had brought, had jumped down from the bar to start exploring. Rashly it had rubbed against the Doc's legs. At his vigorous objection, it

streaked for the upstairs hallway and vanished.

"If I catch that flea-crawly varmint on my bed," fumed Doc Crabtree, "I'll—I'll—"

"Yuh'll what?" flared the little redhead.

"Is that snoopy feline going to be a pest around here?"

"Not a pest. A pet. It's a new house rule, along with signin' the register. Nuthin' had better happen to that cat, Doc, because these four kittens ain't weaners yet!"

"I might add," ventured Dictionary, "that if the cats catch all the mice around town, then Chow Now is less likely to feed 'em to us."

"I guess that makes sense," the Doc admitted grudgingly. "But—"

"Thunderation, quit yore wranglin'," boomed Judge Bertram. "Let's go eat!"

Doc Crabtree spat out his chewed-down cheroot.

"Ham n' eggs for me," he grunted. "Just to be on the safe side."

All of them trooped across to the restaurant shack and were back at Thimble Jack's in about an hour. The evening followed as had many others lately. For months Painted Post had enjoyed uninterrupted peace. The Judge and Doc Crabtree settled down to their everlasting pinochle game. Magpie yawned his way upstairs. Thimble Jack buried himself in a mail order catalogue while Dictionary rustled up a box in the backroom for the kittens. Shorty stuffed it with dry grass and bedded them down in it.

BLUE STEELE, on leaving the restaurant, crossed to the jail office. In the squat, thick-walled adobe, he lighted a reflector wall lamp above his battered flat-topped desk.

For a long time he sat in his desk chair, an unlighted cigarette drooping from his lips, reflecting somberly on what Judge Bertram had said, or was about to say, when interrupted by the arrival of "Bill Kinsey."

The Sheriff of Painted Post had brought law and order to the Arizona border. In the stormy years his reputation had spread, making him the Southwest's most noted lawman. Shorty Watts had shared in his achievements, with all their risks and hairbreadth escapes. They were a formidable team, and the border frontier owed the two of them an undying debt.

Now, because of the insignificant cost of his small pay, the little deputy was to be thrown aside, like a wornout boot. Steele thought he knew where the petty policy originated. Old Man McCall of the Box L, one of Indian County's largest landowners, was a notorious skinflint. He had started the pinch-penny idea of firing Shorty.

As he mulled it over, Steele's hands lifted to the badge he had worn so long and so valorously. Slowly he unclasped it from the front of his calfskin vest. He had decided now. If Shorty was going, he was going too. He started to push himself up from his chair.

Running feet rattled the loose sidewalk planks. Steele knew those hurried steps. He was on his feet when Shorty panted into the jail office.

"Hey, Sheriff, come quick! Something mighty odd has happened!"

When they reached Thimble Jack's, the mother cat was in the middle of the floor and everyone present was knotted around her, in fixed fascination. Steele thrust himself into the tight circle. The cat had just come down the stairs, dragging something.

"We figgered it was a string o' mice when we first seen her!" gabbled Shorty. "But look, it's a shirt!"

"A bloody shirt," Steele said grimly.

"Mister Bill Kinsey's shirt!"

"That's a cat for you!" crowed Doc Crabtree. "A cat would as soon eat a man as not, like I've always said!"

The cat started towards her kittens, which were crawling out of the box where Shorty had put them, as she called to them. Steele suddenly thrust himself forward, crouched and seized the sinister trophy. There was a bulge in the red-stained pocket. He unbuttoned the outer flap.

A wad of currency fell out. He straightened, taking it to the bar and smoothed the money flat. A blood-marked yellowback was folded in the wad.

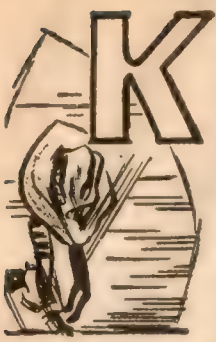
"Migosh, a hundred-dollar bill!" breathed Shorty.

Judge Bertram grabbed it. Pressing it flat, he saw the torn corner. His eyes bulged under shaggy, frosty brows.

"Good Godfrey!" he exploded. "It's the money I sent with Magpie! To Baldy Bascom!"

CHAPTER III

The Helpless Hostage



KINSEY was a light sleeper. The sound of his shirt being dragged off the chair where he had flung it aroused him. He was up in an instant, jerking the six-gun from under his pillow.

The door from his room to the hallway was half open. He had been unable to grate it shut, because the ramshackle building that was Thimble Jack's Saloon and the Painted Post "hotel" was warped and out of plumb.

In the doorway, vaguely lighted from downstairs, he saw the cat. With an angry exclamation he made for it.

The cat scampered down the hall. Cursing under his breath, Kinsey fumbled a match out of his pants and struck it on the rough board wall.

Gone! His shirt was gone! And with it his Cottonwood loot! The work of a sneak thief? Then what did the cat have to do with it? Kinsey heard snores in the room across the hall. Then he heard voices below. He listened intently. He heard the sheriff arrive. Judge Bertram's heavy, explosive exclamation came plainly.

Quickly he got into pants and boots, stiffly and painfully drew on his coat, then clapped on his hat. As he did this, Bill Kinsey formed a desperate plan.

Slipping across the hall, he entered Magpie's room. He jabbed a cold gun muzzle against the sleeping stage driver's neck. He leaned close.

"Wake up!" he croaked savagely. "But not a sound out of yuh, you gabby old galoot!"

It was a scary awakening for Magpie.

"Wh-what's goin' on here, dang it?" he muttered confusedly. "Who—"

Kinsey clapped a hand roughly over his mouth.

"Do what I tell you!" he grated. "Git up and march downstairs! Make one funny move and it'll be yore last!"

Just then Steele's voice came from the foot of the stairs, ringing with challenge.

"Come down, Kinsey! Come with your hands up and empty, you hear?"

The killer jabbed Magpie to his feet. "Yeah, I hear," he called out. "I'm a-comin'."

"Git started!" he hissed in Magpie's ear. "Be nice and mebbe yuh'll live to tell about it!"

In bare feet, Magpie proceeded to the stairs and started his shivery descent. The six-gun was pressed against him and Kinsey's breath was on the back of his neck.

"Here I come," Kinsey sang out.

Steele was wily enough not to stand in the lighted opening below. To one side of the stairs he was poised, with a ready Colt. Kinsey's boots clumped on the stairs. Magpie's bare feet made no sound. But his ludicrous appearance made a sensation as he emerged into the lighted saloon. His lank form was attired, from wrists to shins, in long underwear. His bony knees shook. His seamy face was soap-white.

Kinsey was pressed close behind him, with a twisthold on the slack back of his undershirt.

"Yuh kin clip me Sheriff, sure yuh can. But it'll mean a slug through this hombre's carcass before I drop," he gloated. "Now git back, all of you!"

He sidled towards the batwing doors, keeping himself shielded. He paused there to jab the six-gun over Magpie's shoulder towards Dictionary.

"Come here, you! Skitter past me and up tuh the corral! Bring my hawse, saddled an' ready!"

Dictionary flung a pleading glance at Steele.

"Do like the man says," the sheriff nodded.

"If yuh ain't back sudden, I'll blow this ol' buzzard apart hunk by hunk!" vowed Kinsey. "Hold on, one thing more! That money on the bar! Bring it here!"

At that close range, Steele could easily put a bullet past Magpie. But as Kinsey threatened, it would mean Magpie's finish. It was a deadlock now, as matters stood. The thing to do now was the unexpected—to think faster than the man that mocked and threatened him.

HE HOLSTERED the Colt and moved unconcernedly towards the bar.

"I'll hand it over, Kinsey," he said. "Myself."

"Not you!" the other snapped. "It's little Birdlegs I'm talkin' at!"

But the sheriff was already at the bar. He made no move meekly to hand over Kinsey's bloody loot. He had shifted his position only to get between the killer's gun and Shorty.

The little deputy understood. This was the kind of perfect teamwork that needed no spoken word. Shorty made a whirling dive for the backroom.

Kinsey's six-gun roared. The muzzle blast was deafeningly close to Steele. It made a splintery hole in the partition behind him. Shorty scooted through the dark backroom and outside, then around the building. Kinsey knew enough about the layout of the premises to realize he had lost his advantage. In a matter of seconds, the flashy little redhead would be at his back, there at the batwing doors.

Sizzling a curse, he backed outside, dragging Magpie after him. He started up the dark sidewalk, blazing a shot at the swinging doors behind him to discourage pursuit.

But Steele spurted out after him, a split-second behind the shot. His ears rang numbly from the gun blast at the bar. He cleared the sidewalk at a leap and hit the street. There at the corner of the building he saw Kinsey lash out with his gun barrel. A thud and a gurgling cry. Magpie collapsed in a limp heap. Kinsey was swallowed up in the night.

Shorty burst around the other corner of the saloon front, just as Kinsey darted back along the opposite side, into the back room and through it as the crowd in the saloon surged into the street. He grabbed his holdup money from the bar, stuffed it in a coat pocket and was out again, the way he had come.

He couldn't risk a dash to the corral now for his horse, with all the hubbub along the street. Silent as a shadow, he melted into darkness, out in the open desert, away from the town. Safely away, he stopped and listened and his face twisted into a relieved grin.

"Outsmarted the whole caboodle of 'em!" he told himself triumphantly. "Lucky that Magpie jasper spilled the beans about the hundred when he did! Otherwise I might of flashed it and got nabbed by that blasted sheriff!"

Now that the high-pitched excitement was over, his shallow rib wound throbbed anew. His leering grin became an ugly scowl. He hadn't been able to get what he came after—a patch-up job at the hands of the only medico on the border, Doc Crabtree. No chance for that now. Kinsey's high-heeled boots sank deep in the loose, dry sand as he plodded away. Presently he stumbled onto a shallow wash that slanted towards the stage road, north of town. He moved along it until he reached dusty wheel-tracks. He hunkered down, beside a cut-bank that gave some shelter from the searching desert wind. If he waited long enough, a rider might come along . . .

Back in town, Steele was hindered by the rush from Thimble Jack's to the street. In the dim starlight, friend and foe looked alike at a few paces. He sent Shorty to stand guard at the corral, then returned to the saloon. There, as the others trailed in, he saw that the money on the bar was gone.

He assumed that the bartender had pounced on it at first opportunity.

Magpie, with a swelling lump on his head, was hopping mad.

"What's things comin' to around here?" he yowled. "It's got so a man ain't safe in his sleep, even!"

"The law's too bust coddlin' cats," sniffed Doc Crabtree.

"Thunderation, give the sheriff credit for spottin' that cuss right off as a shady character!" Bertram pointed out. "While you was hob-nobbin' with him at the bar, as it so happened!"

"Give the cat credit for bringing things to a showdown," was Steele's mild rebuke.

"I've got a bigger holler'n anybody," mourned Thimble Jack. "I'm out the price o' four drinks, plus room rent!"

The sheriff's stone-gray eyes glinted and his bronzed face went stony, too. "You mean you didn't grab that money?" he asked.

"Me?" Thimble Jack looked blank. "I did not!"

Steele's gaze swept them all. "Who did?"

They all looked even blanker than had Thimble Jack.

"S'pose the cat dragged it off?" suggested Crabtree.

STEELE knew then how Kinsey had tricked him. His pride was stung as never before. The affair between them was a personal one now. He gave up his idea of mentioning his resignation to Judge Bertram. This was no time to

quit. The bold fugitive had robbed Bascom. The money, red with his own blood, proved there had been gun doings up Cottonwood way.

"That's about what happened," the Doc insisted. "That cat got the money."

Dictionary cleared his throat hesitantly. "Excuse me for differin' with that opinion, Doctor," he said mildly.

"What d'you mean?"

"Take a look behind you."

Crabtree about-faced. The mother cat had just emerged from the backroom. She carried a squirming mouse in her teeth.

The ghost of a smile touched Steele's lips.

"A better job of catchin' than I've done so far," he said ruefully. "Apologize to the cat, Doc."

The judge and Doc Crabtree couldn't get their minds on pinochle after so much excitement. Bertram decided to return to T Bar T. It was a five-mile ride up the stage road to the Caliente ford and beyond. He said goodnight and started for the corral. "Hold on, I'll go along," spoke up Steele.

"Good Godfrey, I don't need no bodyguard!" huffed Bertram.

But the sheriff fell right into step with him.

"Got to tell the segundo to stand guard," he said. "So long as the Kinsey hombre is afoot, he won't get far. Come morning we'll round him up."

Shorty was at the corral gate. He was armed now. He'd got his .45 from the jail office.

"Any luck, Sheriff?" he sang out hopefully.

"Better trot over to Chow Now's and grab yourself a quick cup of coffee, segundo," was the answer. "We're staying up tonight, you and me."

Judge Bertram got his moon-gray at the feedrack and saddled it.

"I'll have my outfit on the lookout for Kinsey, Sheriff," he promised as he led his horse to the gate bars and lowered them. "But like you say, a man afoot won't get far overnight in this country."

"Wait'll the segundo comes back and I'll ride as far as the ford with you, Judge."

"What for? Not much!" Bertram objected vigorously.

"You're not heeled for trouble."

"I don't expect none. But I can take care of myself, if it comes."

"Bascom probably figured the same way. He's dead now—that's my guess."

Steele slipped a Colt from holster and offered it. "Pack this, then, Judge," he said.

Bertram stubbornly thrust the Colt away from him. "When the time comes that I'm scared to ride my own range, I'll let yuh know about it," he declared.

He swung to saddle and started. When Shorty returned from the restaurant, the sheriff had his steel-dust gelding under leather. With a word to the little deputy, he was off in the direction that Bertram had taken.

ONLY a few minutes had elapsed since Bertram's departure. In that time, the judge had reached the dip where the stage road crossed the shallow wash. There a figure loomed suddenly and his blood chilled at the barked command to halt. Before he could act, a hand grabbed the moon-gray's bit chains.

"Pile down, Frogface," a voice crackled, "or I'll blow yuh down!"

Churning with helpless anger, Bertram was compelled to obey.

"Yuh're playin' yore luck too strong, Kinsey!" he fumed. "It won't last!"

"Got any more yaller money on yuh?"

"Thunderation, if I did have I'd keep it!" blazed Bertram.

The six-gun slapped out. The blow on the side of his head sent Bertram reeling. Kinsey struck again. Bertram dropped to his knees. Kinsey booted him flat, with a brutal kick in the stomach.

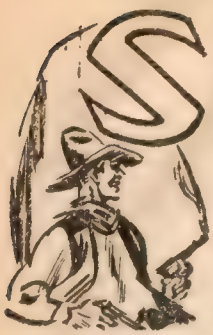
"Mebbe that'll learn yuh tuh be polite, old-timer! Also, it'll keep yuh from chasin' back to town and blabbin'!"

Lifting himself to the moon-gray, Kinsey crossed the road and proceeded down the wash, raking the T Bar T horse into a lope.

THE SHADOW OF LADDER H, by TOM GUNN
Another Complete Painted Post Novelet—Coming in the Next Issue!

CHAPTER IV

Riverbank Chase



SHERIFF STEELE, unusually keen-eared, would have heard Kinsey's getaway, but his ears were still filled with the deafening ring of that gunshot back at the saloon.

His eyes still had owl-like night vision. He saw the heap that was Bertram in the road dust and hauled up, bounding from saddle. The judge moaned weakly as he was brought to a sitting position.

"Yuh—yuh was right as usual, Sheriff," he gasped as he felt the steady, supporting arm. "B-but I'm all right, don't mind me! That hellbender Kinsey, he—he—"

He swooned before he could finish.

Walled in by dark, robbed of hearing and nagged by the ceaseless wind, Steele felt almost as helpless as the man sagging heavily in his arms. How bad hurt Bertram was, he didn't know. One side of his face was puffed and bloody. Right now, the judge's welfare meant more than anything else.

Dragging, tantalizing minutes later, he unloaded the judge's 200 pounds from the gelding in front of Thimble Jack's. In passing the corral he had called out to Shorty. The latter had dashed down and was inside, raising an alarm. The saloon ceiling lamp blinked on. Crabtree was out in pants and nightshirt, suspenders dangling. He helped carry the groaning, retching Bertram inside. They placed him on the bar and the doc's nimble fingers made a quick, expert examination.

"Hm-mm, no damage that time won't mend," he said. "Take it easy, John, while I dig up something to ease the pain. Hey, Dictionary, where are you? Fetch my black bag, you lazy loafer! What happened, anyhow, Steele?"

No answer came. He looked around. The sheriff was gone. So was Shorty. No need now to guard the corral, to prevent Kinsey from getting his buckskin, but the two of them were up there. Steele tingled with impatience while the little deputy caught up and saddled his pinto.

"Purty hopeless, us trailin' that varmint tonight!" Shorty chattered as he tugged the latigo tight around the pinto's resisting belly.

"Morning will be no better, with this wind wipin' out his tracks," Steele said.

Soon they reached the spot where Bertram had been waylaid.

"Whichaway yuh figger Kinsey lit out?" asked Shorty.

"What's your guess, segundo?"

"I'd say he took the fastest direction away from here."

The answer wasn't so absurd as it sounded. The wash was free of growth or other barriers. It was natural for a haste-driven fugitive to follow the smooth, gravelly course.

"That's the way we'll go, then," Steele decided.

Even in the dark, the lawmen knew the lay of the land. They knew the vast expanse of Indian County as no other men knew it. That detailed knowledge of every landmark, every sink and outcrop, had helped them on past chases and skirmishes. They would need all that knowledge now.

So down the wash they rode, with the cold dry wind in their faces. Steele's granite eyes probed every twist and slope, his right hand light across his thigh, close to Colt butt. He was ready to gamble the quickness of his draw against a murderous ambush.

Across the harsh desert the wash meandered towards Caliente River, some five miles north of Painted Post. About halfway between stage road and river it narrowed to a gap that slashed a low ridge. In the close-walled gap Steele halted the gelding and dismounted. The floor of the wash, he knew, was silted at this point and the silt was encrusted with alkali. The alkali would hold a hoofprint. He crouched low. Even in the starlight, irregularities in the white surface were visible.

He saw tracks, felt of them, and the clean-cut edges told him they were freshly-made. He was up and back in saddle with new eagerness.

"You're a good guesser, segundo," he said in a low undertone. "The judge's moon-gray isn't far ahead of us."

"Mygosh, that's like findin' a haystraw in a needlestack!"

They filed through the gap, the alkali crunching under the gelding and the pinto like crusted snow. Steele kneed

the gelding to a lope, to gain precious minutes. Nearing the river, the wash dropped to bottomland thickets.

Here Steele brought his mount down to a walk. Across a quarter-mile of flood bottoms the Caliente flowed past a willow-grown bank. This cover was ideal refuge for a hunted man. His chances for dodging pursuers were good even in full daylight. In the dark he could lurk within a few feet of them without betraying his whereabouts.

AT TIMES such as this, Steele had learned to depend on the gelding's senses more than on his own. The steel-dust, sleek and fast, also possessed a hunting instinct and seemed to know when to use it. Steel watched its ears and was sensitive to any sudden intake of breath that would tell that his horse was on a scent.

Its stride slowed as it started a descent to a mesquite flat, its head turned and the ears flicked. Steele felt the sudden swell of ribs under his saddle. He leaned forward and stroked the warm neck.

"Good work, boy," he murmured encouragingly. "The judge's moon-gray is an old friend of yours. Let's find him."

Of its own accord, the gelding halted, lifting its head slightly, nostrils flaring. The pinto came stock-still behind it. For a long interval the two horses stood and the pinto showed signs of awareness now. All at once it nickered. With an exclamation of annoyance, Shorty grabbed at its muzzle but his move was too late. The sound had flung warning of their presence.

They descended quickly now to the mesquite where the sheriff halted and swung down again. He pressed his way into a thicket, drew and opened his long-bladed knife and drove the sharp point into a thick, tough trunk.

Shorty was oblivious of the strange thing that Steele did then. He closed his teeth over the knifeblade with lips drawn back so as not to contact the steel. An Indian listening-post, this was, a trick of woodcraft few white men knew. The sheriff, still half-deafened by Kinsey's gun, waited for sound vibrations that would tell of any movement nearby.

His pulse quickened at a telling impact on delicate nerve tissues. Sharp and clear the unheard sounds came, at intervals like slow steps of a horse in loose rock. Quickly Steele straightened, whipped the knife from the mesquite and was back to the gelding, stepping to saddle.

"Get set and ready, segundo," he ordered. "Remember that gravel bar, downstream from here?"

"Yeah, sure, Sheriff!"

"Our man's yonder. Probably watering the judge's horse."

"Migosh, how in creation d'yuh know that?" Shorty croaked in utter mystification as they surged forward again toward the river.

The murmur of the river covered the sound of their approach, and they came on their man where Steele had said. The moon-gray was easy to see, out there on the open bar, thirty feet beyond the fringing growth. The horse jerked up its dripping muzzle as Steele sang out sharply.

"You're through, Bill Kinsey!" the sheriff called. "Drop your gun, let's hear it splash!"

There was a sudden movement and a splash—the splash of the moon-gray's hoofs as the startled fugitive reined savagely and spurred it into the dark current.

Flame stabbed from Steele's right-hand Colt. Water geysered, spraying Kinsey.

Steele triggered four times. Amid the din, the frenzied T Bar T horse reared, stumbled and fell with a tremendous splash.

"Migosh, yuh hit the judge's hoss!" shrilled Shorty.

"It lost footing, more likely, on that treacherous bottom," Steel said as powdersmoke whipped past his face. "Crowd in on him, segundo!"

The gelding and pinto plunged to the shallow bar. The moon-gray was floundering ashore. Yards below, Kinsey bobbed into sight. Steele beaded and squeezed. Kinsey went under just as the Colt roared and the slug splashed where his wet, hatless head had been.

The man evidently was an expert swimmer. He wasn't surrendering, that was certain. He had timed his dive uncannily well. He came up again, sucked in a fresh breath and once more vanished like a muskrat as the Colt drove lead after him.

He was getting out of range. At the sheriff's touch, the gelding whirled and made for the bank. Past the dense, fringing willows Steele streaked, shouting at the little deputy.

"Catch up the moon-gray!" he ordered. "Make for the river trail, meet at the gap!"

THE trail was back on solid ground, at the edge of the wide bottomlands. Steele did not head for it. He sent the gelding crashing through and around undergrowth and tangles of flood debris, coming to the river bank again about one hundred yards down. He saw the splash of Kinsey's water-weighted sleeves as he swam, moving swiftly with the current in midstream. One shot emptied his right-hand Colt. The bullet skittered crazily—another miss. Accuracy was impossible. He couldn't see the sights.

Making another circuit through the jungle of willows, the sheriff repeated his maneuver. Swimming and drifting, Kinsey was moving downstream almost faster than the gelding could follow amid the many bank obstructions. Reloading, Steele hammered water around the fugitive's bobbing head. There was an off-chance of a wild shot finding its target.

On one roundabout lap in the strange pursuit, the gelding came onto a deep backwater but plunged unhesitantly into it. The soft mud bottom sucked it down stirrup-deep. It struggled up the steep opposite side, where snags and thorns gouged both horse and rider. This was hard, dangerous going.

When Steele sighted Kinsey again, he was floundering towards the yonder bank of the river but the river was faster now, making a long glide as it approached the gap, a narrow cleft in the black mass of the Caliente Hills.

This was the gap where Steele had directed Shorty. There was a dashing rapids in the gap narrows, where the river foamed over treacherous lava boulders. A swimmer would be unlikely to survive in such water.

Kinsey must have known that in striking across current. He was making for a gullied bluff that gave good promise of survival and escape. Because a horse couldn't cross that glassy sweep with the burden of a rider. Such an attempt would be suicidal. It would be swept into the cauldron of the gap.

Steele estimated the odds of racing back to the ford, crossing to the north bank, then coming down and hunting out the fugitive. On open ground, that would have offered some hope of success. But along the bluff, down towards the gap, there were numerous places where the hunted man could conceal and defend himself.

Such were the prospects now—prospects that Kinsey would make a getaway—as the sheriff sighted him again across open water. This was the last opportunity for a lucky shot. Emptying one Colt in a pounding bombardment, Steele swapped to the left-hand Colt. The bullet splashes vaguely guided his aim as he squeezed out one, two shots and then a third.

The third shot didn't splash like the others. A solid smack came across the water, though Steele couldn't hear it. But he did hear the sharp, agonized cry and saw Kinsey's swimming stroke falter. His progress shoreward stopped. He drifted now in the speeding current. Steele flung the gelding around in another dash.

CHAPTER V

End of the Trail

THE going was easier now, along a strip of blowsand where the wind, funneling through the gap, hurled stinging particles in his face, already raked raw by thorny branches.

Forty minutes or more had passed since they had come onto Kinsey at the gravel bar. They had covered a three-mile stretch. The river's soft murmur had become a roar as white crests tossed amid the rocks. Making his final stand where the gorge closed in, Steele's anxious gaze vainly swept the tumbling flow for his man. It would be no credit to the law if Kinsey merely vanished. His death must be proved, his loot recovered. Finding the battered body, once it was carried through the gap, would be next to impossible.

Such a search would involve monotonous days of search, and once the night's events were known every rascal in the Los Pasos country would be combing the Caliente's banks for the rich reward in the drowned man's pocket. Los

Pasos, the border settlement downriver, was a lawless place, notorious from El Paso to Tucson for the riff-raff characters that congregated there.

These were the thoughts that swept through Steele's mind as he scanned the rapids. It was darker here in the gap—a darkness that preceded daybreak. In another hour or so there would be a thin seep of light along the eastern horizon, too late to be of aid.

The jaded gelding turned suddenly, ears lifted. Its heaving sides fluttered as it gave a soft, answering nicker. Steele reined from the river, across the blow-sand to the screen of mesquite.

There stood Shorty's pinto, with Bertram's moon-gray beside it, reins lopped over Shorty's saddle horn. But where was the little deputy?

Steele noticed, then, that the coiled lariat was missing from Shorty's saddle. The observation sent a shudder of uneasiness through him. What wild, reckless plan had the redhead attempted? Steele made an abrupt return to the river. He scooped a windrow of dry driftwood into a heap. Crouching, he succeeded in lighting it with the fourth match.

Fanned by the wind, the debris quickly flamed, flinging long, wavering light down the rugged walls of the gap and along the thin strip of beach.

Steele's eyes pounced on something, then, that turned his uneasy premonition to genuine alarm. In a little heap beside the lapping, foam-crested water lay Shorty's boots and his flaring bullhide chaps. They were weighted down with his .45 and holster belt. And his tracks led into the river.

Back through the stormy years Steel's mind flitted to the numerous occasions when the nervy little redhead had plunged into mixups easier than he emerged. He had a liking for the unusual and unexpected. He certainly had indulged in that liking now to the fullest. Steele heaped new fuel on the fire, adding to it until the flames crackled higher than his head.

The widened firelight danced to the opposite wall and in between half-submerged knobs of lava lifted above the rushing river. They stood out plainly, the wet surfaces reflecting light. As plainly on one of them, out from the bank a good distance and a little downstream, stood the little deputy on feet braced widely. It was movement more than the figure that caught Steele's eye—the movement of a whirling, widening lariat loop.

A shout rose in the sheriff's throat but he fought it back, for Shorty made his throw. The rope slithered out mid-river and dropped.

Just as it fell a man's arm lifted. It wasn't a conscious gesture, but part of a weakening struggle as a man's body rolled helplessly in the Caliente's remorseless grasp.

Shorty tautened the rope, with swift, nimble hands. The hondo closed. An uncertain interval, then it drew to a heavy pull. Then Bill Kinsey was swept surfaceward as he swung at rope's end. The loop had closed just above his elbow. Steele saw the man's gasping, white face.

Shorty, thrown off-balance, nearly tottered from his uncertain perch as one foot slipped. Then he dropped to his knees and gripped the knob of lava like he would clamp onto a bucking bronc. Very slowly, against the force that was almost too much for him, he brought in rope hand over hand.

STEELE let loose the shout now, a shout of encouragement. He scurried to the driftwood for more fuel. The wet rope ran out through Shorty's fingers. The suspense was torture as he twisted half around, using his body as a windlass so as to regain his grip. But he was unable to recover rope, to haul Kinsey to him. And he was tiring under the strain, Steele could see that. But he hung on. He refused to let go. If his leghold slipped on that lava . . .

Steele had his own rope off the gelding's saddle now. He stepped to the shore, shook out the coils, whirled and threw.

The wind was against him. The loop fell short. He hauled it in and tried again. Wettened, the next throw was better, was about to span the distance between them. Then a gust snatched it fiercely, the loop flattened, sagged and splashed yards from the rock.

This was no good. Something had to be done, fast. Steele dropped his rope and ran to the moon-gray. He breathed prayerful relief to find Bertram's rigging carried strong manila coils.

He worked in frantic haste, calling out:

"Hang on, segundo, hang on!"

He dallied Bertram's rope onto the gelding's saddle. He dropped the hondo over his head and cinched it tight around his lean, hard middle. He dashed for the river, scooping up his own lariat as he surged into the water.

It sent an icy shock through him. He felt the squeeze around his ribs. His feet lost bottom. He drifted helplessly. He went under, came up again, hastily filling his lungs and went down again.

The rope jerked tight, whipping him to the top. Back by the fire, he saw the faithful gelding brace itself to his weight and the angry power of the river.

He and Shorty were near together now. The problem was to span the distance between. Steele groped with long legs for a foothold, found one momentarily and in that moment succeeded in making a throw. It was a clumsy effort. But luck was with him, at last. The loop descended over Shorty's head. To prevent it from closing stranglingly around his neck, he poked one arm through it.

The effort cost him his knee-grip. He was whirled off the rock and tumbled in a backward sprawl into the powerful pull of the Caliente.

Could the gelding fight the weight of the three of them? Three lives depended on the strength—and intelligence—of the horse. Steele took in rope that reached to his saddle horn before the full tug of them all came onto it. He had his lariat bighted in Bertram's when the terrific jerk came.

He saw the gelding stagger at the impact, then a ripple of muscles under the smooth steel-dust coat as it leaned its weight against this sudden, overwhelming demand.

Along the rope came a creaking strain that sent a message of dread through fingers, arms and to his laboring heart. If that rope should fray and snap, somewhere along the forty feet of it, all his ingenuity would be wasted. No amount of presence of mind could save any one of them.

But Steele was swinging shoreward. He found footing on a ledge and braced himself for a pull that nearly ripped muscles loose from their tendons. But he hauled in a yard, then another.

Carried away from the ledge, his bootsoles grated on gravel. Here the water depth was just to his arm pits, the current a trifle kinder. He hand-climbed up the rope some more.

Every inch gained was precious. The river scooped gravel from under his feet. He fought for new bracing. Shallower bottom now. The water piled around his hips.

It was an agonizingly long time before he waded out, legs aching with the cold and strain. But with firm sand under him, the rest was easy. Shorty floundered onto the bank.

THE two of them dragged Kinsey ashore. The man had remarkable stamina to have endured so much. He was double-branded by bullets—the thin slash in his side inflicted by the dying Bascom and a bone-splintering wound in his left forearm that was the work of Steele. On hands and knees he crawled to the fire, coughing up water. The sheriff flung on more driftwood. Shorty hugged the heat, his teeth chattering.

"Yuh d-don't s-seem grateful for us s-savin' yore life, Bill Kinsey," he stuttered.

"It'll be a short life," Steele said grimly. "If Bascom is dead."

"Yuh was set on rescuin' this, not me!" the captive snarled as he drew a soggy wad from a coat pocket and hurled it towards the river.

Steele leaped and caught the robber loot as it left Kinsey's hand. Even yet, fight was left in the bedraggled outlaw. He saw the holstered .45 on Shorty's heaped chaps and boots. He half-rose and pounced on it. Shorty frog-leaped onto him. In a short, vicious struggle, he twisted the weapon out of Kinsey's numbed grasp.

The man deserved no further mercy. Steele got him, sodden and sullen, onto the moon-gray and hog-tied him there. Chilled and exhausted, Kinsey's spirit broke. He whined to get back to the fire. Steele ignored the plea. He joined Shorty, regretfully examining a water-soaked sack of tobacco he took from his dripping calfskin vest.

Day was breaking now. As soon as it was full daylight, they would make triumphant return to Painted Post. The story of their quick capture would spread fast. It would end all talk about abolishing Shorty's job. He wished that Indian County taxpayers, especially Old Man McCall, could have seen the dauntless little deputy in action.

Knowing nothing of this, Shorty's

thoughts revolved about an entirely different matter.

"Migosh, I'm hungry," he said plaintively. "Mighty near hungry enough tuh set down to a mess of stewed mice."

"You still worrying over that, segundo? Forget it."

"Then what in creation did Chow Now want with six dozen mousetraps?"

The sheriff laid tobacco, paper and matches on a rock to dry. His haggard face relaxed with quiet amusement.

"One last mystery to solve, isn't there? Well, segundo, did you ever try to hang laundry out on a clothesline in a desert wind?"

"Who, me? Chow Now does the Chinee-washee for everybody in town, includin' us. Yuh know that, Sheriff."

"Sure. That's why the old boy needed a flock o' mousetraps."

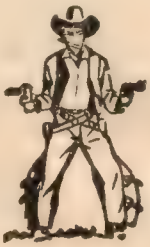
"I still don't savvy," Shorty grunted.

The sheriff's amusement grew into a soft chuckle, which was unusual for him.

"Plain, old-fashioned clothespins won't hold in weather like this," he explained. "But mousetraps do, I reckon. Anyhow, Chow Now aimed to try 'em."

Shorty's freckled face beamed with genuine relief.

"By golly, that's the best news yet!" he cried, reaching for a boot and struggling to get it on over a wet sock. "Now I really *am* hungry! C'mon, Sheriff! Let's ride!"



Next Issue's Two-Gun Fiction Headliners

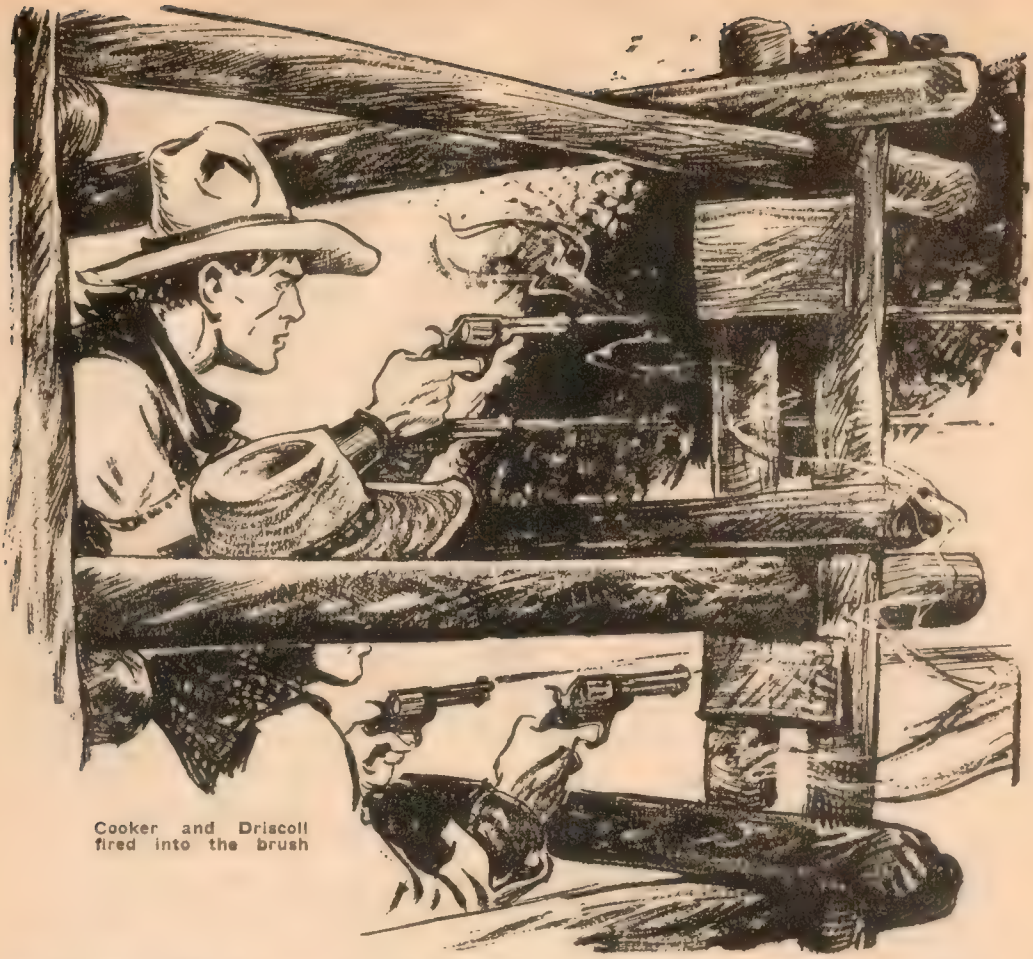
RAPID action is the keynote of THE BORDER PATROL, William Hopson's featured novelet next issue. It's the story of Tom Powers of the immigration service, and the peril that awaits him across the line when he goes on the vengeance trail to find a friend's killer. Punch-packed from start to finish, THE BORDER PATROL is a top-flight reading treat!

APACHES and the Cavalry clash in THE FIGHTIN' MAN, a smashing novelet by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson which also appears next issue. In this yarn you'll meet Major Joseph Berrin—a chunky young campaigner who draws the scorn of older officers, but turns the tables when he figures out a plan of action which amazes them all. And—here's the payoff—his inspiration for his idea comes from the ancient Greeks!

NEW adventures await the lawmen of Painted Post in the next issue, when Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts star in THE SHADOW OF LADDER H, a novelet by Tom Gunn. When a group of renegades try to discredit Sheriff Steele and start a round of gun trouble, they find they've bitten off more than they can chew—and the showdown's not long in coming!

GUNS flame on the range when Chick Bowdrie, the intrepid Ranger, battles to save a nester's home and keep the nester himself out of jail on a trumped-up charge—in CHICK BOWDRIE PASSES THROUGH, a story by Louis L'Amour which moves swiftly and surely to a bang-up climax.

EXCITING and colorful, BUCKSKIN MAN'S BOOMERANG by Scott Carleton is the latest episode in the colorful saga of Buffalo Billy Bates. And in addition, the next issue will contain other grand yarns and features—a feast of good reading from cover to cover!



Cooker and Driscoll fired into the brush

ROPE LEGACY

By Bud Wilks

Trick twirling and gunplay foil a landhog!

THE night was dark as the two men rode into the D Bar C corral, carefully closing the gate behind them. Matt Driscoll felt uneasy as he dismounted wearily. He reached for the saddle cinch on the roan and stood motionless, listening.

"What's the matter, Matt?" Lance Cooper asked, peering through the shadows in the same direction his partner was looking.

"Hear that crackling noise over south in the brush beyond the corral," Driscoll said, in low tones. "There could be somebody hidin' there, Lance."

"Probably only an animal wanderin' around." Cooper swung out of the saddle. "Don't let Jeffery Heath get yuh to feelin' spooky, Matt."

"He told us he wanted this ranch of ours, and he didn't care how he got it." Driscoll frowned, staring at the black-

ness that was the brush and trees not more than a hundred yards from the south side of the corral. "Remember Heath has a couple of gun sharps workin' for him."

"I ain't forgettin'," Cooper laughed, lean and tall in the shadows. "But I ain't wearin' two guns just to balance me either. And I never seen you run away from trouble yet."

From the brush a gun roared. Driscoll heard the hum of the bullet speeding past his right ear. His hands flashed to the Colts in his holsters. The guns thundered as they came up, barrels leveled at the spot beneath a tree where he had seen a flash of flame.

Cooper's pistols also spat fire. Then the two men raced closer to the fence, using the poles of the corral for protection. Again their four guns pounded lead into the brush, but no answering fire came from that direction.

"Looks to me like we're just wasting cartridges," Driscoll said and stopped firing. "That drygulcher is either dead or he went away from there in a hurry."

"I don't figger he's dead," said Cooper, dropping his weapons back into the holsters. "Listen!"

From back behind the trees came the sound of a horse being ridden through the brush, the sound growing fainter and fainter.

"There he goes," Driscoll said. "Reckon he didn't expect such a warm reception."

"What did he think we would do?" asked Cooper dryly. "Stand here and let him shoot us."

DRISCOLL laughed. The two men went to their horses, unsaddled them, took their gear and headed for the harness shed. The roan and the pinto joined the other horses of the cavvy at the far end of the corral.

Walking toward the ranchhouse with his partner beside him, Matt Driscoll again felt proud of being half owner of the D Bar C—D for Driscoll and C for Cooper. It was a nice little spread.

The two men had formed the partnership a little over a year ago. Before that Driscoll had been giving trick roping exhibitions at various rodeos—he was an acknowledged expert with a lariat. He had met Cooper at one of the shows. Since they both had saved quite a bit of money they decided to become partners with a ranch of their own.

But three months ago Jim Watson, their good neighbor and owner of the big Wagon Wheel spread, six miles to the north of the D Bar C, had died, and the Wagon Wheel had been sold to Jeffery Heath.

Heath was a stout, middle-aged, partly bald man who was almost always smiling. But his affable manners were a deception, for he was a range hog at heart. The D Bar C bordered Heath's range on the south and he wanted the spread. There was no question of water rights—both ranches had plenty of water for their needs. Heath was just greedy.

Since he was smart enough to realize that most gunmen do not make very good cowhands, he had ten regular riders in his outfit who did the work on the Wagon Wheel and did it well. But recently Heath had hired two new men, Ed Lawson and Joe Farrell, who were obviously gunsharps.

A couple of days before Heath had ridden over to the D Bar C and found the two partners at home. His two gunmen had been with him.

"Just thought I'd drop in and see if yuh had changed yore mind about selling," Heath said.

'No, we haven't changed our minds," Driscoll told him.

"We like it here," Cooper had explained, staring at Lawson and Farrell who sat their saddles, watching and listening. "And we aim to stay."

"Too bad." Heath shook his head sadly. "You're a couple of nice boys. I hate to see you make a mistake."

"Such as?" asked Driscoll coldly.

"Such as not sellin' me this ranch, for instance," Heath said. "I made you a fair offer."

'Shore," said Cooper. "About half what the land is worth, not countin' our stock and buildings and all. No, we ain't interested, Mr. Heath."

"I'm sorry. You see I'm a man of determination and generally get what I want." Heath lost his smile and looked mean. "I'm going to have the D Bar C, and I don't care much how I get it."

"Comin' from anybody else, I'd figger that might be a threat," Matt Driscoll said then. "But comin' from you, there ain't any doubt of it."

"No threat, but a prophecy," Heath said, wheeling his horse. "You'll be sorry."

He rode away, his two gunmen following him, and the trio did not look back. Since then Driscoll and Cooper had been ready for trouble, which developed soon. All day they had been searching for some missing stock. They had finally found it. The cows had been driven back into the hills and slaughtered.

And tonight, when the partners had ridden back to the ranch, someone had tried to drygulch them at the corral.

"We can't prove a thing against Heath," Cooper said, as the two men were eating supper in the ranchhouse a little later. "If we go to Sheriff Small and claim that Heath killed our cattle and his men try to drygulch us, Small won't believe it."

"I know." Driscoll pushed back his coffee cup. He was looking thoughtful. "We've got to force Heath out into the open, Lance. Don't yuh remember, when he first took over the Wagon Wheel, what that saddle bum told us at supper, three months ago? About meetin' Heath on the trail and recognizin' him?"

COOPER scratched his blond head. Then his face lighted up. "Why, shore!" he cried. "The saddle bum said Heath was the same feller who'd been in trouble about a few years back, over holdin' up a bank in Nevada. Said Heath was arrested, put on trial and then acquitted for lack of evidence. Heath was goin' under the name of Booth, then. But we didn't believe the saddle bum."

"But now I've got a hunch the saddle bum may have been right," Driscoll said. "At any rate, it's given me an idea." His eyes started to twinkle as he gazed at his partner. "It shore is a lucky thing my uncle back East died suddenly and left me fifty thousand dollars!"

"Yore which did what?" demanded Cooper, looking at his partner in astonishment.

"My uncle back East left me fifty thousand dollars," Driscoll repeated. 'And I've got the money in cash in the bank in Festival."

"I don't believe it," said Cooper.

"Neither do I," said Driscoll with a grin. "But Heath might, if we spread the story around town so that he's shore to hear about it."

"Oh!" said Cooper. "Light dawns in the East, as the feller says."

"It always has in this part of the country," said Driscoll. "What do you think of the idea, Lance? It just could be that Heath might even be tempted to try and rob the Festival bank if he thinks he could wipe us out by doing that."

"Suppose he asks Sam Arnold, who runs the bank, about you having that much money there and Arnold tells him we are a couple of liars from way back?" asked Cooper doubtfully.

"Arnold won't tell him anything," said Driscoll. "Sam is a good friend of ours and nobody likes Heath much around here." He yawned. "Me, I'm going to bed. Shore feels good to be rich."

The next morning Matt Driscoll rode into town, and Cooper remained at the ranch to take care of things there. Festival was four miles west of the D Bar C, and Driscoll found the little cowtown quiet when he finally reached it.

The post office was part of the general store, and to Driscoll's delight he found a letter for him with a New York postmark that looked quite official and important. He opened it and found it was an ad from an insurance firm—but Driscoll suddenly let out an excited yell.

"My Uncle Hank back in New York!" he shouted, as everyone in the store turned in his direction. "He died a month ago—the estate has just been settled and he's left me fifty thousand dollars. Whoopee! I got to see the bank about this."

He rushed out of the store, bumping into Jeffery Heath as he did so. He did not pause, but ran on down the street to the bank, the letter still in his hand. He quieted down when he found Sam Arnold in the bank.

The gray haired president of the Festival Bank took Matt Driscoll into his private office, and there Driscoll told him of the hoax. Arnold listened silently until the big dark haired rancher had told his story and then the banker smiled.

"I suspect that you have made Jeff Heath a very unhappy man," said Arnold. "And of course a bank should not give out information regarding its depositors to anyone. So far as I am concerned, should anyone ask, you might have fifty thousand dollars in this bank and then, again you might have fifty cents."

They shook hands and Driscoll departed. As he stepped out of the bank he was again apparently in a state of great excitement. He hurried to his horse

and swung into the saddle.

"I hear you have come into some good fortune," said Heath hurrying to the hitching-rail in front of the general store.

"I shore have," said Driscoll excitedly, and then a thought struck him. "Say how much will you take for the Wagon Wheel, Heath? Think it over. I've got to tell Cooper the news."

He rode out of town fast, leaving an unhappy, bald-headed, fat man behind him. Matt Driscoll considered his trip to town had been quite a success.

The next day there was apparently not the slightest doubt in the minds of any of the citizens of Festival that Matt Driscoll had inherited fifty thousand dollars, or that the money had been shipped to the local bank where it was deposited to Driscoll's account.

No one questioned the money being in cash instead of a check, as it probably would have been had Matt Driscoll actually inherited anything. The story had been well planted and it sprouted nicely.

ACTING on a hunch Driscoll and Cooper had ridden into town just before dawn that morning without being seen. Driscoll had stationed himself on the roof of the Festival Bank, a neatly coiled lariat beside him. There were few men who could do the tricks he could with a rope and he had a hunch his skill might be needed. Cooper was hidden in an alley down the street across from the bank.

A few minutes after the bank opened for business, three masked men appeared and stepped inside, guns in their hands. From either side of the inside of the bank door men leaped at them and dragged the masks from their faces, revealing the countenances of Jeffery Heath and his two gunmen.

"Get out of here!" shouted Heath. "It's a trap."

He fired one of the two guns he held, putting a bullet in the arm of the man who had snatched away his mask. Then Heath dashed out of the bank, with Lawson and Farrell close behind him.

As they reached the street, lead blasted at them from all directions and they realized they had to fight if they hoped to remain alive. They stood back to back, firing at the men who were shooting at them up and down the street.

On the roof of the bank Matt Driscoll shook out his lariat open the noose and made a perfect throw. The noose settled around the necks of the three men and Driscoll drew it tight before Heath and his gunmen quite knew what had happened. In a matter of seconds they were bunched close together, the loop around their necks holding their heads close.

Men rushed from the buildings and knocked the weapons from the hands of the trio. It was Lance Cooper who reached them first and hit the guns out of Lawson and Farrell's hands.

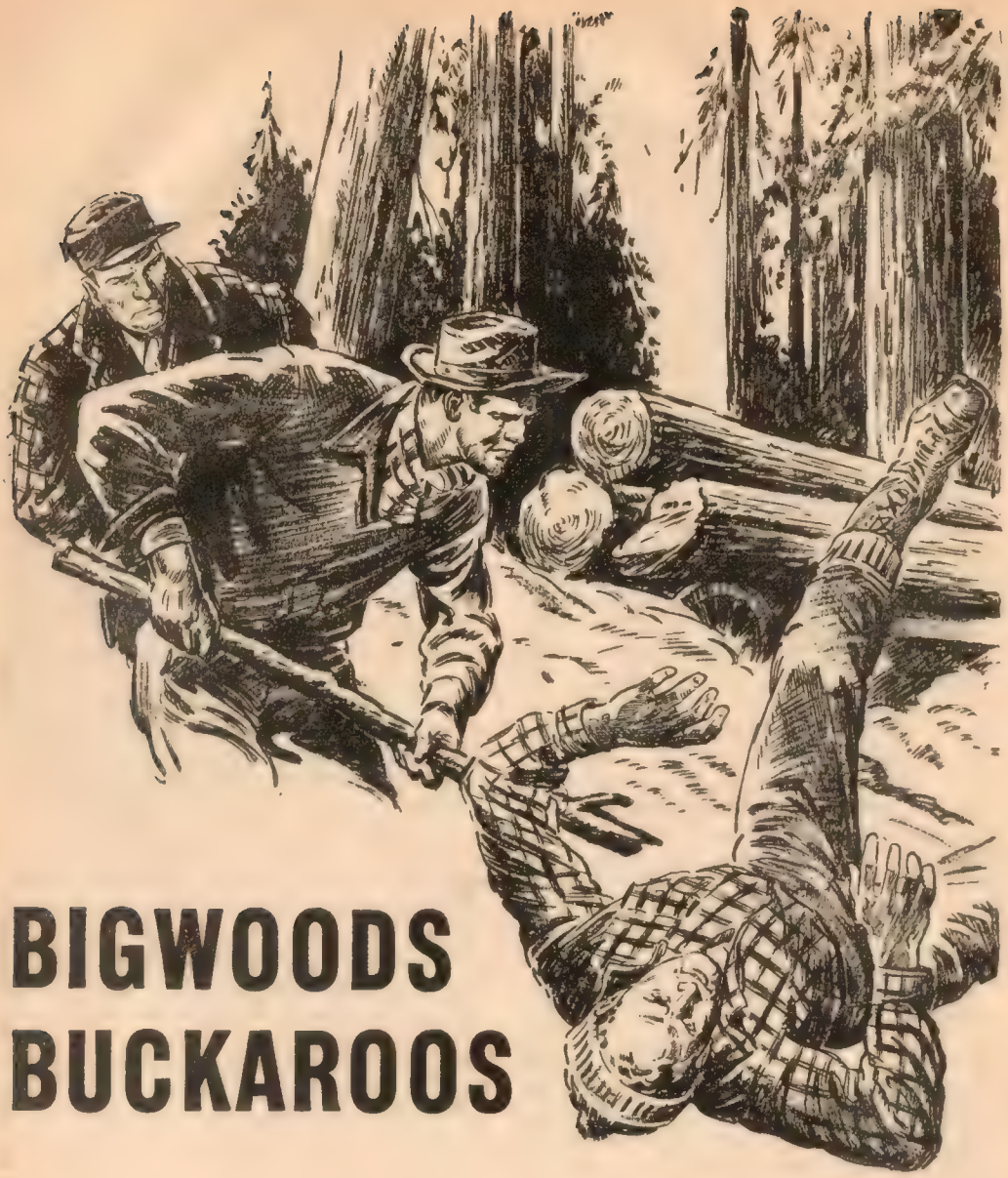
"All right, Driscoll," called the sheriff as other men held the prisoners. "You can slacken up on that rope now." The old lawman shook his head as he stared at Heath. "Never thought you would be fool enough to rob a bank, Heath."

"He was trying to put us out of business by stealin' the money Matt inherited," said Cooper. "Only Matt didn't inherit anything."

"I shore didn't," said Driscoll, who had climbed down off the roof. "Guess the only legacy I've got is knowing there will be peace around here now that Heath has proved what a crook he really is, so everybody knows it."

"Yeah." Cooper glanced at the lariat that Driscoll was carrying again neatly coiled. "You might say that Heath inherited a rope legacy."

Rodeo Fans! Foghorn Clancy, America's most famous rodeo expert, tells his own true story of arena adventures in MY FIFTY YEARS IN RODEO, a colorful and exciting saga of the tanbark beginning in the June issue of RODEO ROMANCES—now on sale, 15c at all stands!



BIGWOODS BUCKAROOS

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

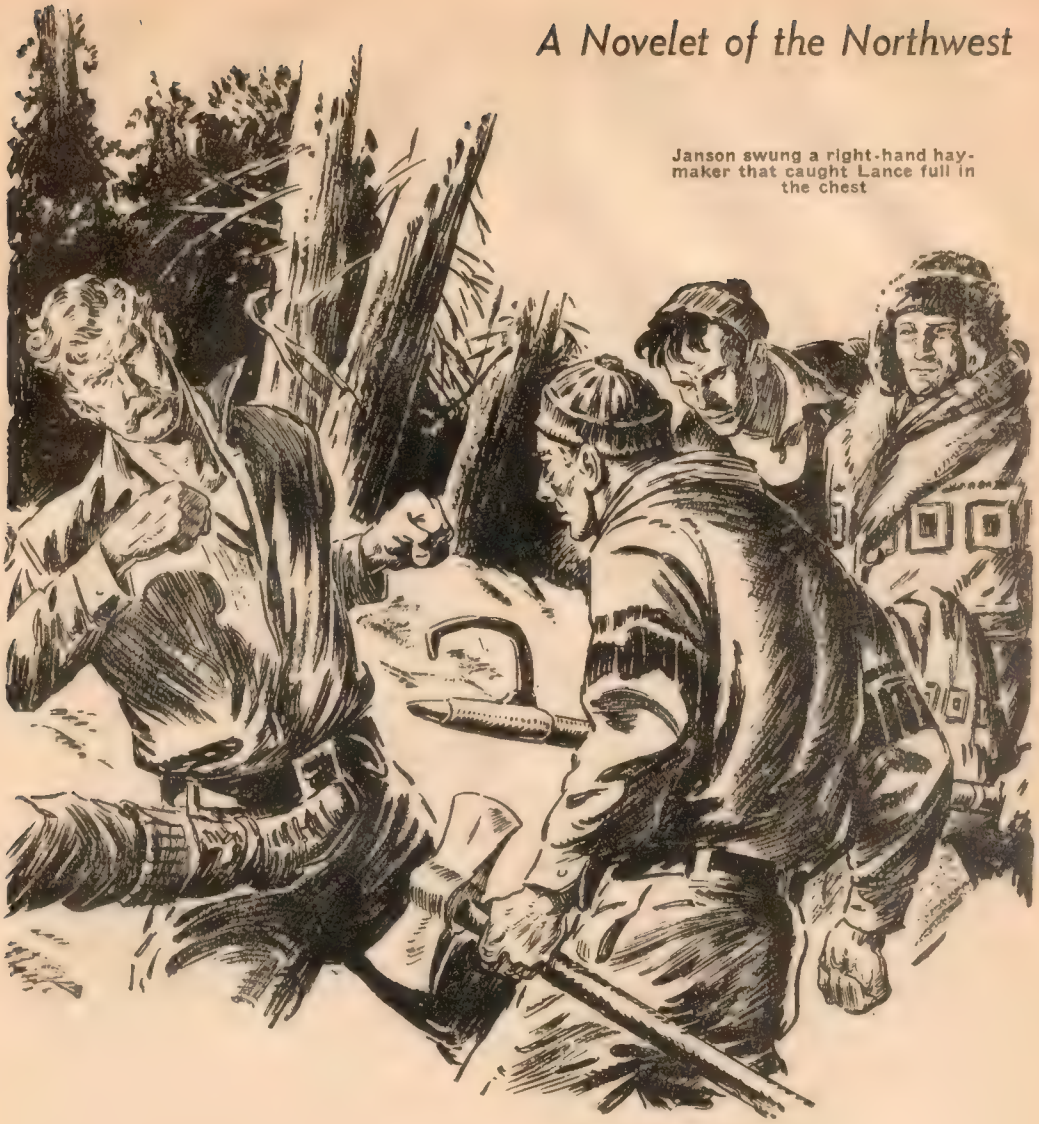
CHAPTER I

Unlawful Logpile

LANCE STEWART thrust his hands sharply into the pockets of his mackinaw coat. His usually passive, gray-green eyes were now alive with flame as he conned the mass of tangled fallen timber ahead—cut timber, which a crew of swampers were trying to straighten out and snake to the skidways.

There was trouble here. Lance could tell at a glance. Good fallers didn't make many mistakes with the cuts. The odd spruce or fir might fool the crosscut men in a wind, but seldom more than once or twice in a cut. Here there were twenty or more handsome spruces crisscrossed and piled, a labyrinth that was plainly a piece of sabotage.

A Novelet of the Northwest



Janson swung a right-hand haymaker that caught Lance full in the chest

A tall-timber trouble shooter takes a long chance for victory and launches a wild no-quarter battle of death-defying giants!

A mess such as confronted Lance Stewart might, in the routine operation of cutting and milling a couple of million feet, have been chalked off as "just one of those things," had it been the first and only apparent act of sabotage to buck the logging operations of the North Fork Logging Company. The reason big Lance Stewart had come up here to shoot trouble lay in the many similar acts designed to stall the North Fork outfit and cause the company to lose its contracts.

Lance strode forward, coming to a halt close to a big hunker of a logger who was obviously the boss of the cut. Lance knew this man, "Peavey" Janson, a logger brought in from Minnesota.

"Havin' more trouble, Janson?" Lance said crisply.

Janson looked sharply up, his glance seeming to have trouble driving through his heavy blond eyebrows.

"Trouble? Yah! An' ain't you the smart trouble shooter! I'm given a crew uh cowpokes for loggers an' what happens?" He broke off, scowling.

LANCE started with resentment. He'd punched cattle himself in his day and had a deep respect for the initiative and resourcefulness of most cowhands. In the slack winter ranch seasons, many of them came up here to the woods and acquitted themselves admirably. They were especially expert as swampers and skidders because they knew how to handle horses. Lance shot a glance at such a swamper pair now, quite evidently cowhands. They stood watching the big trouble shooter whom they'd liked the first day Lance had come up to the Wyoming woods.

Lance smiled at them and then turned to the big faller boss again.

"Leave this cut to the swampers an' start fallin' in a new cut, Janson," he directed. "I'll take a look back at you later in the day. Seems to me, the way the growth is here, you shouldn't have any difficulty dropping the big fellers where you want them."

Janson scowled and stuffed snuff down inside his lower lip. He jerked at the handle of a crosscut saw and nodded to his falling mate. Lance heard him grumbling, but suddenly swung around at the sound of a bawling steer, a strange sound so deep in the high woods.

He glimpsed two riders hazing a half-dozen shorthorns along a skid road. They were T-Slash cattle, beef on the hoof for the North Fork camp. The sight of the steers was like a link with his old ranching days. He turned to the two swamper cowhands.

"Do the best you can to clear out this mess, boys," he said softly. "It's pretty much tangled up, but if you take your time, you'll make it. Clear it up before you move into the new cut, no matter what that big jasper Janson says. Tell him these are my instructions, huh?"

One of the men nodded, grinning.

"Right, boss," he said. "Glad you showed up. We ain't caulk-booted loggers our ownselves, but it didn't take me an' Red here long to see Janson was pilin' these spruces deliberate. It wouldn't matter to us if he piled 'em sky high; we git our forty-five a month with extry for the team, an' our grub, but, boss, it just don't set well on our stummicks, savvy?"

Lance nodded, grinning.

"Thanks—uh—what's the name?"

"Grif. I'm Grif Maunder, boss. Just call me Grif. This is Red, Red Bain, an' if you need a hand any time, just give us a shout. Things git sort uh dull around, times."

"Okay, boys. I'll be doin' that," Lance returned with enthusiasm. "I've got a big job on my hands. Got to see a million board feet, at least, gets out on time to fulfill contract terms, otherwise the North Fork outfit forfeits their deposit and all claims. Just keep your mouths buttoned up, cowhands, and don't ever give that jasper Janson any idea you have suspicions. So long now. I'm goin' back to camp. I'm hungry as a bear."

The waddy called Red gave a lazing horse a flick with a line end and, chuckling, he winked at his pardner.

"That ramrod's ready to start trompin' out a nest uh rattlers, Grif," he said as the team eased into their collars, "an' I've an idee we're goin' to be right on hand to he'p count the rattles."

LANCE STEWART sat eating a slab of raisin pie and drinking coffee when the cook, old Canthook Cassidy, limped into the mess shack, wiping his big longhorn mustache with the back of a hand. Lance had met up with Cassidy once at another camp.

"Look like you'd run into bad news from home, son," Canthook said gruffly. "Like to make a medicine talk?"

Lance finished his pie, took a big swallow of coffee, then swung a leg out to straddle the bench.

"You've been around the big woods a long time, Canthook," he said slowly, then chuckling, added: "So long, you begin to look like a birly fir. You've met up with all sorts of loggers, so tell me, what d'you think of that faller boss Janson?"

Old Canthook blew out his mustache and leaned forward.

"I've been around the woods ever since I high-tailed it off'n my uncle's ol' cattle ranch as a young heller," he said. "I've done most every kind uh work, from bull-cook to river drivin' with the Cana-

dian-French an' I've met a lot uh men. I don't shoot off my mouth much. But I like the North Fork outfit, son. I like you because you're hotted with the right sort uh brandin' iron, so I'm tellin' you, Peavey Janson's a sidewinder if I ever seen one. I've seen him build up a crew uh curly-wolf runnin' mates, too."

"All of which means what, Canthook?" Lance cut in.

"Wal, son, you're the trouble shooter. It's up to you to find out. From my corner it looks like Janson an' his wolves ain't on'y bein' paid by the North Fork outfit, but are in the pay uh some other outfit, some outfit which stands to profit if the North Fork's contracts are busted."

Lance pulled himself sharply to his feet, and looked squarely into Canthook's rheumy eyes.

"Thanks," he said softly. "I'm goin' to take a ride, and if anybody asks for me, you don't know a thing, sabe?"

"Heap sabe, boss, but watch your step. Accidents can happen deep in the woods."

Lance rode down along the rimrock of the first of the North Fork's canyons. The river was running slush ice and debris and was angry water at the narrows where the whitecaps leaped and lunged like rebels.

A few miles farther on, Lance pulled up his horse. His brows flicked sharply upward as he glimpsed a pile-driver outfit at work. He'd noticed some log piling running the stream back a way.

Shortly he fetched up with the crew and called to a man he took to be the ramrod of the outfit.

"What goes on here, mister?" he asked.

"Uh—the drivin', huh?"

"That's right. Who's got authority or permit to dam the North Fork?"

"I'm workin' for the Prescott Mills outfit, if that's what you mean, stranger," the big man replied. "Who are you? Government man?"

Lance didn't show that the mention of the Prescott Mills outfit had affected him at all, but it had. He knew the Prescott Company, a logging, milling outfit which was a heavy competitor against the North Fork Company. It was evident that the Prescott Company intended damming the stream here, and it didn't look right to Lance. In the first place, this land, both sides of the river, was privately owned. T-Slash outfit range land.

A dam here would flood a wide acreage of valuable hay land. Secondly, unless the Prescott Company had a special Government permit, they could not, within the law, construct a dam here. There was such a law as freeway of potential logging or navigable waters, and another law about riparian rights which held both banks as public property. Lance had had to learn all this in his trouble-shooting experience.

Another thing he thought of: a boom was all that was necessary to catch river-driven logs, logs to be caught and driven into a mill pool. But there was no sign of a mill here.

"What's the real idea back of this pilin', mister?" Lance asked the big boss. "It don't make sense to me."

The man hesitated a moment, then swinging, flung out an arm toward the lowland haymeadow country to the south, flanked by a flat-top ridge.

"Mill goin' up on the ridge there, stranger. Lowland will be flooded to make a catch lake. Prescott figures to mill here, then float his sawn timber downstream. A good idea. He's leased what acreage he needs from Burton, owner of the T-Slash. That's all I can tell you. Who are you anyhow?"

"I'm Lance Stewart, trouble shooter for the North Fork outfit, an' thanks for your information. So long."

Lance wheeled his horse and started back along the river rim, thinking as he rode. It seemed to him a mighty strange thing for Mace Burton of the T-Slash to do, this forfeiture of many acres of hayland. It just didn't jell properly in Lance's mind.

Things would come tougher for the North Fork outfit now. They, too, had figured on driving the river, but now, there was that Prescott dam.

Lance decided to ride on up to Cody for a confab with Mac Conway, head of the North Fork outfit. They must between them find out if the Prescotts had a permit, by law, to dam the river. If they had, then the North Fork Company might as well kiss their present contract goodby. But as he rode along, something seemed to rebel in Lance's mind, a thought that there was something rotten in Denmark, or here in Wyoming along the North Fork of the Shoshone River.

"Stinking River" was the Indian name for the Shoshone, and to Lance it had begun to smell bad indeed.

Back at his camp, he made preparations to leave at once. He got in touch with Grif Maunder and Red Bain, asking them to keep their eyes peeled while he was absent. He took a quick ride out to inspect the new cut area he had assigned to Janson and the faller crew, but found that Janson had been careful to avoid another tangled jam. Still Lance didn't trust the big Minnesota logger boss.

Before dusk, Lance was riding the rimrock river trail again, bound for Cody.

CHAPTER II

Town Topics

LANCE found Mac Conway in town, but the North Fork big boss was in bed at his hotel. Lance arrived at the room as a doctor was leaving.

Lance's forhead crinkled in a sharp frown as he gazed at the stained bandage on Conway's head. The big boss blinked owlishly up at his visitor, taking a moment or so to make sure of his identity.

"Lance! How come? Thought you were shootin' trouble in the woods."

Lance nodded, as he twisted a cigarette.

"Trouble has a habit of spreadin', Mac," he said with sharp meaning. "What happened?"

"Don't rightly know, Lance. I was up at the Prescott woods; went to see Dave Prescott about that dam he's constructin'. He was pretty salty an' right there an' then I found out somethin' I didn't before know: Dad an' ol' Nat Prescott used to be pardners in the Oregon bigwoods. There was a mite of trouble an'—wal, Dave Prescott's carryin' the ol' chip on his shoulder, keepin' the ol' feud simmerin'. He—"

"But what about your head, Mac? You claim you don't know what happened?"

Mac winced and grimaced.

"I was ridin' back through the woods when somethin' hit me. Doc claims it could have been a piece of sharp hardwood, or—it could have been a bullet. I can't remember hearin' a shot, but then I was fogged out pronto. Must have choked the horn as my bronc bolted. Ol' Crow Indian sheep-herder picked me up a couple of miles from the woods.

Lance stared sharply through the small bedroom window. He had stubbed out his cigarette butt and got to his feet.

"Didn't you get any information on the dam, find out if the Prescotts had a Government permit?" he asked without looking around at Conway.

"They have a permit to drive piles for a boom, Lance. And we can't do anythin' about that. What they'll do is skeleton pile the river and rig up a quick knockdown dam—a construction they can dispose of easily when they're through with it, or if a Government inspector should happen to get salty. But you can bet your gun they'll fix it so our drive can't go through. Dave Prescott's out to get us, an' his dad, ol' Nat, is in pretty thick with the judge here—politics. Looks like we're plumb across the barrel, Lance, unless—unless you've got some bright idea?"

Lance continued to gaze out along the rutted street. The stage had just come in and for a long moment his mind seemed to stray from the worries of his woods problems as he watched the hustle and bustle down at the old log stage station. But all at once he swung to face Conway.

"Back me up, Mac," he said swiftly, eagerly. "I think I've got something. We'll mill up at the woods. I'll get friendly ranchers along the valley to cooperate, with the hire of teams and good fightin' cowhands. We'll start haulin' dimension stuff as soon as we can start millin'. We—"

Mac Conway interrupted, coughing. He smiled now as he looked up into Lance's flashing eyes.

"Sounds good, Lance, but for one thing, where you goin' to find a haul road? Know of a trail, without havin' to bridge the river? You can't trespass on T-Slash range because old Mace Burton is in thick with the Prescotts against us, even though you do buy our beef from him."

Lance was, for the moment, utterly stalemated, but he shot a glance at his boss again.

"Will you give me a free hand up in the woods an' elsewhere, Mac?" he asked. "You haven't got much to lose the way the Prescotts have the cards stacked."

"Okay, Lance," Mac replied, slowly, as

if he'd weighed each word most carefully. "We sink or swim on your idea."

"Thanks, Mac," Lance said. "I may need a lot of ready money, but I'll be careful with it.

Their eyes seemed to meet and lock and hold a long moment, then Mac Conway's batted and he smiled.

"Okay, Lance. Go ahead. As soon's my head's mended, I'll be seein' you. Make it look good, Lance. Good luck! An' say—on your way out, have somebody bring me up a bottle of Green River, huh?"

Lance nodded, jammed on his hat and left.

OUTSIDE on the sidewalk, he came across old Nat Prescott, who'd come in on the stagecoach. Nat was walking with old Judge Freer. Prescott called to him, his seamy face twisted in a grin as Lance fetched up.

"How's things up in your neck uh the woods, Stewart?" he asked gruffly.

"They were kind of bad, Prescott, but they're clearin' up. Wish I had time to tell you just how well they're clearin' up. You'd be interested."

Lance turned abruptly off the sidewalk and made his way to the telegraph office. He had some orders to send out, chiefly orders for machinery. He'd need circular saws, two or three at least. You never could tell what might happen to a saw when a gang of curly wolves was loose in the woods. He was about to write "powder" down on the message form, but held up. He'd do some scouting first.

Catching a bite to eat, he hustled to the livery stable and got his well-baited horse. Before dusk he wanted to do some exploration work along the river.

Lance pulled up his horse at the end of the low land, at a point where a deep dry wash gully ran at right angles from a canyon of the main river. The former creek was dry, and grew wild fruit and other scrub brush. Yet once it had been a water course of no mean order. At its head, near the river, Lance could see a formidable barrier of rock and rubble, the work of a former big landslide.

The trouble shooter's pulse beat quickened as he rode up close to the canyon whose lashing water boomed and roared like angry mountain thunder. A slow grin curled up his mouth corners. He turned his horse, heeled him on down the steep bank to the bottom of the gully and headed him toward the south. He particularly wanted to explore this old creek bed.

"Should have sent that order in for powder," he told himself, frowning. "Reckon I'll have one of the boys ride in to the telegraph station tomorrow."

It was close to dusk when Lance came to a fence which crossed the creek. His blood tingled as he realized this was the south boundary fence of the T-Slash range. He climbed his horse out and rode around until he came to a gate in a rail fence, a different fence, and followed an old dim trail to a nester's outfit. An eye of light winked from a small leaning log shack as Lance dismounted and legged on up to the door.

Shortly he was being greeted by a bewhiskered old man, known to all the valley folk as Nester Nolan.

"Mister Nolan?" Lance said.

"That's me, son. Come set a spell. Hoss looks tired. Let's hitch him an' give him a bait."

Lance sat across a heavy old table from Nester Nolan. They sipped coffee as they talked.

"You own all the land south uh the T-Slash boundary?" Lance asked.

"Shore as shootin', son, all deeded reg'lar," Nolan replied, champing his bearded jaws. "Why? It ain't f'r sale."

Lance smiled and took a sip of hot, black home-roasted coffee.

"I'm from the North Fork Logging Company, Nolan. I want to log down the crick along your place. I see the crick makes a wide swing to eastward around your outfit an' that'd suit me just right. We'll pay you your own figure for loggin' rights along the crick. How about it?"

Old Nester Nolan's eyes were wide, his brows hoisted almost up to his hairline. He swallowed hard now as if fighting to free words.

"You ain't been eatin' loco weed, son, have you?" he asked in all seriousness. Lance grinned. "No, nary a leaf," he answered. "What's in your craw?"

"Common horse sense, son. How in tarnation d'you figure to drive timber along a dry crick? Goshamighty! they ain't ever been water in this crick, save for a spell at spring freshet time, since I come here, in eighty-three."

"I'm askin' you to lease the rights to me to log the crick, Nolan. It'll be my

problem how I do it. We'll pay you plenty, cash on the line. What about it?"

OLD NOLAN shrugged, stabbed his pipe dottle down and relit it. "Okay, okay, son. Go ahaid," he finally agreed. "It'll be kind uh sociable to have men around ag'in. You go ahaid an' pay me what you think is right. I reckon I ain't forgot to know when I'm dealin' with a square-shooter."

"Thanks, Nolan. Well, I'll be getting along." Lance got to his feet and strode toward the door. He turned to Nolan again, his eyes flashing their sharper lights.

"We're bein' bucked by a salty crew of rival loggin' jiggers, old-timer," he said. "You might have callers once we git movin'. Keep your whiskers buttoned up, huh? If you see a gang of men at work up the highland to the north, don't worry, they'll be my men. I'll have a check for you, or cash, and papers for you to sign within a day or so. Thanks for everything, and—so long."

Old Nolan chuckled. His had been a lonely life for many years. He hadn't seen any logging operations for a long time, not since he'd hauled by bull team the logs that formed his squat shack and barn and chicken house. Now he would have a lot of company. The big woods boss had also mentioned he would like a few beef steers. Nolan rubbed his hands and moved out with his visitor to the lazing bronc, well fed and watered.

Lance Stewart rode on back to the woods, and although his mind was somewhat easier, his forehead was still plowed. His scheme, his plan, was the most venturesome he had ever contemplated in all his years of bigwoods trouble shooting. Yet its very bigness caused his heart to thump strongly, determination mounted in him.

The Prescott bugles had sounded attack, and Lance Stewart loved a fight, no matter how sharp, so long as he was sure his cause was just and right, and he was sure that the North Fork cause was very right.

Yet Lance realized that his fighting forces would consist in the main, of cowhands and wranglers, men of the cattle ranches, as against the experienced loggers of the Prescott curly wolf outfit. But Lance Stewart knew his cowhands and their ability. He had a good sample of this in Grif Maunder and Red Bain. He would hire on others, many of whom had done their hitch with axe, peavey, canthook and crosscut in the woods. He had a sprinkling of good old-time loggers with him. Canthook Cassidy was one of these, a man who could boss any department of logging operations if called upon so to do.

CHAPTER III
Blow for Blow

LANCE STEWART accelerated his activities with drive now. Red Bain had gotten away an order for dynamite. Grif Maunder had been sent down to the lower valley to round up suitable cowhand-wrangler help, with teams. Hay was hauled up and the logging trails became a hive of bustling activity.

Today Lance strode on to inspect a cut. He had been absent from the woods for some days. Now he heaved his broad chest as he inhaled the invigorating tang of newly cut spruce.

"T-i-m-b-e-r-r-r-r!" It was Janson's booming voice Lance heard. It was a grand call, for it smacked of action. When the giant tree crashed, sending up a gout of snow and debris, Lance's body tingled and the short hairs on the back of his neck crept sharply.

But he came to a sudden sharp halt, his grin gone, as he glanced swiftly over the zone at which Janson and his crew were at work.

"The dirty, double-crossin' lunkhead," Lance said bitterly. "Half this stuff is burled, dozy. It wasn't even cruised for a cut."

He hurried forward as Janson was socking his axe blade into another tree bole.

"Hold it, Janson!" Lance called. "What's the idea of cutting here in this dozy stand?

The big faller boss looked around, snarling. He sank his axe into the bole and swung, to stride toward the big boss trouble shooter.

"You been ridin' me a long time, Stewart," he said thickly. "Now tell me how I get to the next cruised cut if'n I don't clear this stand out uh the way?" His sharp ice-blue eyes were dancing now, but they didn't disturb Lance.

"You could've swung around it. You've been doin' swampers' work,

wastin' good money and valuable time. Seems like you've set yourself to block every move I've made. Now you're through. Come on up to camp and get your time!"

Janson coughed sharply. He wheeled to flash a glance at his crew men. Lance couldn't catch the play of the big faller's eyes as they flashed messages to Janson's friends. He didn't like the looks of things. All men had ceased work and several of them were slowly gathering close in, trimmers, fallers and swampers alike. For the most part they were the Minnesota loggers who had come up with Janson.

"You boys can get back to your jobs," Lance called out. "If there's any argument, it'll be between Janson and me."

Not a man moved. Lance half turned and smiled lightly as he glimpsed Grif Maunder and Red Bain moving up at his back. He turned again to Janson.

"You heard me, Janson. You're through workin' for the North Fork outfit. Understand?"

"Mac Conway hired me, you punk trouble shooter," Janson said. "I think I'll set tight until Conway fires me. Ain't that so, boys?" He turned to his curly wolves for support. A big Swede crosscut man answered for the men:

"Shore is true, Yanson. Bay gor! We lak see you start somethin', Stewart."

Lance's mouth tightened. He was glad that Grif and Red were at his back.

"I'm givin' you five minutes more, Janson," he said. "Five by my watch. If you ain't movin' for camp by that time, you'll go out on a rail." Lance now turned to Grif and Red. It was Red Bain who called a warning. Lance whirled. Janson was out of his coat, lunging.

The big faller boss swung a terrific right blow to Lance's ear, but Lance moved away and partly succeeded in making Janson miss. Recovering, Lance shucked his own mackinaw and mitts. He came in feinting with a stabbing left hand which suddenly he dropped, only to hook it savagely to the big logger's chin.

RED BAIN broke a dry birch limb off a nearby tree for a club. Grif Maunder stood spraddle-legged, his mackinaw coat front open as he glared at the big Swede who had mouthed off in support of Janson.

Lance was now backing off, pulling Janson in to hard-packed ground, good footing. Satisfied with his footing, he suddenly swung and chopped a fierce right hand smash to the side of Janson's nose. Blood squirted. The big logger roared. The effect of the blow was the same as if a hornet had stung a wild breaks bull.

Janson leaned backward, then like lightning lashed out with a kick at Lance's groin. Lance rolled with the blow, taking it in the side of the hip. It staggered him momentarily and in that brief flash of time, Janson swung a right-hand haymaker that caught Lance full in the chest, lifted his feet out from under him, and landed him flat on his back.

Howling like a grizzly in battle, Janson flung himself down on Lance's prone form and commenced to pound. In his excitement he was wasting many of his punches, allowing Lance, now recovering his wind, to cover up, but once or twice those ham-like, punishing fists drove smashing blows to Stewart's face.

Red Bain took a step forward, but Grif laid a restraining hand on his pardner's arm.

"Let 'em alone, Red. Wait! Lance has been in plenty bigwoods brawls. Just keep your eye on them other kiotes. Watch that big Swede, him with a hand on that axe. He—"

Suddenly Lance's body rolled, bridged a moment. His legs doubled, then stretched and Janson went spinning clear. Staggering, blowing the blood from his nostrils, Lance shook his head. His eyes were narrowed, spilling red flame as he watched Janson rising. Head down, the big faller boss now rushed and Lance Stewart tossed the rule book into the underbrush.

He shot up a foot, catching Janson squarely on the point of the chin. Janson dropped. Lance was rushing in, crouched, when suddenly Grif Maunder yelled. Lance whirled, ducking as an axe whipped through space. The big Swede crosscut man now lumbered in as Janson recovered, but Red Bain was smartly in to stop him with a hefty blow from the birch club.

Men yelled, Janson's men. They started forward, five of them, but suddenly Grif Maunder whipped a Colt .45 from an inside pocket of his mackinaw.

"Hold it, you curly wolves," he called.

"Back up, all uh you, or I'll let some daylight into you. They's only goin' to be two men in this finish fight, unless some uh you want salivatin'. You—" One man, screened by his fellows, made a grab for his axe. Grif could see only the lower part of his left arm. He swung and pulled trigger. There was a sharp howl of pain as the man danced, holding on to a hand from which had been clipped two joints of the middle finger.

"That's it!" Grif boomed. "That's what I meant."

Grif turned. Lance was caught in Janson's close-in, bearlike hug. Janson half sobbed in his anger as he forced the trouble shooter back—back. Grif Maunder felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he watched Lance give ground, but suddenly, Lance dropped down.

Before Janson could sag to straddle him and start eye-gouging, Lance's strong legs lashed upward. The faller boss was again thrown clear and Lance Stewart really went to work. Janson's men strained eagerly forward, but Bain and Maunder were alert as their friend and boss hurtled into action.

Suddenly a rifle cracked. Grif Maunder ducked as a bullet whined past, a bullet intended for Lance Stewart. And then Grif glimpsed a man stealing through a fringe of underbrush. Grif swung sharply and threw down. The curly wolf pitched sprawling in the brush at Grif's single shot.

Now Lance Stewart was taking over. He had caught Janson scrambling to his feet. He clapped on a wristlock and savagely jerked the big logger in to shoulder butt him and heave him flying over against the brush.

Lance now fought with fury. He stomped with his studded boots. He dragged Janson to his feet and smashed the stubbled face with terrific blows, while the blood coursed down his own face.

When at last he allowed the big logger to stagger to his feet, Lance whipped in and drove a savage left hook to the chin, a blow attended, as Janson's knees buckled, by a chopping right cross to the jaw. Almost before Janson flopped helpless to the snow, Lance had stooped to thrust his hands deep into the cooling snow, where he held them as he grinned up at Red and Grif.

"We'll sled Janson and that hombre you clipped in the brush there, Grif, back to camp, where old Canthook can splash iodine on them. Okay, let's get sleddin'."

Lance got to his feet and turned to eye the still lounging loggers, especially the big Swede who still favored his left arm.

"You make ready to high-tail it out with Janson, Swede," Lance said coldly. "For the rest of you—any man wants to stay an' cut straight, accordin' to my orders, may stay. Those who still want to run with the curly wolf pack can come up for their time."

Two men elected with Swede and Janson to draw their time.

Half-sobbing, Janson staggered and flopped to the sled alongside a whimpering man who was clutching at his right shoulder. Lance climbed aboard. Red Bain was driving. They were leaving Grif behind, but Lance had no fear for him. Grif was still packing his six-gun and knew how to use it.

CHAPTER IV

Jerkline or not—the Logs go Through

STEWART was bossing a gang building down on old Nester Nolan's place. He was constructing an engine house, having decided to mill his cut here. It would be better this way, for he could haul and roll his log cut down the high banks and be ready to drive the creek if his scheme to fill it with fast water panned out. From the mill he figured he could drive a distance of fourteen miles by creek.

He had a good gang of cowhands and was busy on a log corner when, to his amazement, a buckboard, driven by Dave Prescott, old Nat's son and woods boss drove up. On the seat with Dave was old Nat.

Dave dropped to the ground, hitched his team to a fence post, then leaving old Nat to get down by himself, he strode toward the engine housing, directly beneath Lance Stewart.

"Howdy, Prescott!" Lance called. "Social call, or have you got a lot uh somethin' in your craw?"

The young woods boss of the Prescott Mills outfit grinned.

"Heard you was some active around here, Stewart," he answered. "Dad an

I were in the neighborhood and figured we'd just drop around." He turned, nodding to the old steamer outfit Lance had hauled in.

"Nice steamer, Stewart," he said.

"Good enough, Dave, good enough. How's the dam coming?" Stewart framed his question in a mirthless grin. But before Dave could reply, old Nat came snorting up and glared at Lance.

"You gone plumb loco, Stewart?" the old lumberman asked. "How d'you figger to run logs without water?"

"Reckon that'll be my problem when the time comes, Prescott," Lance returned, then swung to Nat's son again.

"You'll have been addin' to your woods' crews lately, Dave," he said. "I let a bunch uh curly wolves out, recent. Figured they'd be headin' up your way. They—"

"If you mean Peavey Janson an' the others, an' you're gettin' salty about it, Stewart, I wouldn't, if I were you. I get what you're drivin' at."

"Okay. Okay, Dave, just so long as we understand each other. You get along with your own loggin' an' don't worry so much about the North Fork operations, huh?"

Dave Prescott turned, glaring, to his father, then back to Lance again.

"We was actually, lookin' for Mac Conway," he said. "Want a palaver with him. Know where we could find him?"

Lance shook his head.

"Can't say I do, Dave, but you can take my word for it that if and when you find him, he won't be asleep. Doc found out it was a bullet clipped Mac up in your woods. Call around again some time. I reckon you'll find things interestin' as we move along."

Dave Prescott's mouth seemed to suck in his lips. His hands bunched, but he turned as old Nester Nolan came puffing up carrying a bushel basket of spuds and other vegetables from his dugout store.

"Reckon you feel all-fired smart, Nolan," old Nat fumed. "You done turned down my proposition, huh? Then sold out to the North Fork outfit and Lance Stewart."

Old Nolan puffed sharply through his whiskers. His eyes glared at the Prescotts.

"This homestead's been mine since '89," he snorted. "I ain't never had no feller tell me how to run it. Times, I've had to back my own jedgment with a ol' forty-five-ninety, but between us, we allus got our way."

Grunting, muttering under his breath, Nat turned toward the buckboard as Nolan picked up his load of vegetables and shuffled on to the shack.

Now he turned to face Lance again.

"Maybe we'll be meetin' again afore long, Stewart," he bellowed.

"Could be. Could be. Free country," Lance called back. "But shake the salt off your tails before you start lookin' for me. Ask Janson if it pays, huh?"

Lance turned and beckoned to his corner ax mate who grinned wide.

"You done spat right in the eyes of a couple of proddy mountain lions, boss," the man said. "Looks like a interestin' time ahaid."

Lance frowned sharply and nodded. He was proud of the crew Grif Maunder had got for him. They were all chousy, lean-bodied peelers and cowhands, men not afraid of work, or of trouble.

Lance treated them well. He needed them. He was wholly conscious of the might of the job which lay ahead, especially the powder job up where the old dry creek was barricaded by the slide at the main river canyon. He had, too, to keep his plans a well-guarded secret and had already begun to work men up at a set of springs to the north of the Nolan home yard. This work was a plant, a blind, a decoy for any snoopers of the Prescott outfit. Lance wanted to give the impression that he hoped to locate sufficient water power topside for the running of his lumber.

A SHARP freeze followed heavy snowfalls, and the lowering temperatures snapped the frosted lodgepole pine boles. Lance Stewart thrilled at the cracking. The weather was ideal for his logging operations. He rode or legged it from one cut to another, from one skidway to another. By turns, he helped peavey and canthook men, or took his turn on the end of a singing crosscut saw.

Now he rode on top of a loaded sled to the rimrock above the creek. Men had built a splendid chute down which, with water boxed in from the springs, the log cut was hurtling steadily to the flatland below. Below, they were reskidded for milling and Lance thrilled at the progress.

Within a week, at his next visit to the

flat land, Lance heard the musical whine of the big circular saw. He had hired another cook at the main woods camp, for Canthook Cassidy was a sawyer of much experience. Lance now watched the old man operate his carriage on which lay a half-slabbed spruce giant. Cassidy ground stolidly on a big wad of eating tobacco, never taking his eyes off the saw as he spit deftly at the sawdust pit.

Striding up and down the home yard, like an old skipper on the Texas deck of a Mississippi river boat, was old Nester Nolan, who puffed through his whiskers with great pride and admiration.

Lance drew up with him.

"Things movin' along to your complete satisfaction?" Lance asked, grinning.

"Uh— O, yeah, Stewart. You shore got yorese'f a good sawyer in ol' Canthook. Him an' me hit it off first rate. Why, I been tryin' to make real hotcakes since '93, an' now I know how. Ol' Canthook there showed me. We play crib, nights. You got yorese'f a good outfit, boy. They—"

Nolan broke off and Lance leaped forward at the savage whine of the saw. The engine snorted to a stop. Men came running. Canthook was down on his back, almost buried by sawdust, but Lance could hear him cussing. At the sawdust pit the tailer man was down, and not moving.

Lance roared orders in every direction as he dropped to his knees beside the wounded man in the pit. Fortunately the tailer was not too seriously hurt. He'd been struck on the head by a flat piece of metal, and cut in the scalp.

Two men were helping old Canthook to his feet. He came up snorting, roaring.

"What happened, Canthook? A hard, frozen knot?" Lance called.

"Knot? Hully smokes, son! No knot could ever hurt that saw. Best start lookin' for iron."

First, Lance saw that the wounded tailer was taken care of, then with Cassidy and the engineer, they examined the log on the carriage. It was Canthook who discovered the source of the accident—the cut head of a railroad spike. He swung, puffing, to face Lance.

"Your curly wolves ag'in, Lance!" he exploded. "Now you'd better have a couple uh good reli'ble hands examine every log. You done a good job when your ordered three saws."

Lance's eyes carried a cold, cruel light. The Prescott men had tipped their hand, showing they would stop at nothing. Lance would get Grif Maunder to root out the man responsible for spiking that log. It was most likely one of Janson's crew who had elected to remain with the North Fork outfit when Janson was fired.

Lance shuddered as he glared at the bloodstained sawdust in the pit. The tailer could have lost half his head.

With the help of Canthook and the engineer, Lance changed saws. They rolled the partly sawn log from the carriage.

Shortly they were ready to go. An inspected log was rolled onto the carriage and Lance stood by, acting as tailer as Cassidy laid a hand on the carriage lever.

"Hi-i-i-i-i-i—" Lance raised his right arm and called a signal to the engineer who let out his throttle. Cassidy, grim-faced, pulled steadily on his lever. The new saw bit in and sang. Sawdust flew! With a deep sigh of relief Lance watched the slab drop, and turned to grin at old Canthook.

Lance turned to the men inspecting logs on the skids.

"Don't be careless, boys," he cautioned. "It'll be a dull job for you, but we can't take a chance. You saw what happened; you know what might have happened."

Lance now hurried up the dry creek to start spudding in. He, himself, would lay the dynamite charges when the proper time came. As he moved along the gully he realized that the time was not far off when he would either yell at conquest, or groan in the realization of failure.

LANCE was eating a thick steak at the main mess shack when Mac Conway and a stranger, a big man, strode in. Mac at once introduced his companion as Jim Foley, head of the Foley, Fraser Company, to whom Conway had contracted to deliver the sawn lumber.

Lance swung a leg over the bench and got to his feet to shake hands.

"Glad to meet you, Stewart," Foley said in a voice which seemed to come up from his boots. "Time's come to make a check on you up here, see how you're getting along with our contract timber. toward the canyon. The time had come Heard you had a sort of crazy idea of

dry-running your cut."

"Yeah? Reckon you must have got your information through the Prescott grapevine," Lance replied bitterly.

"Maybe so, but I got it anyhow, Stewart. I've been down to your mill works at the crick flat. Cain't say I was impressed, an' I've got to be impressed. We cain't stall our customers, which happen to be the Government in this case, any more'n you can stall us. I hope you understand how it is, huh? It's either the North Fork Company, or Prescott Mills. Mac here knew that when he signed the contract, and from the way it looks, Dave Prescott's got you beat."

"You mean the river dam, and his mill, right on water?"

Lance's eyes glinted as he looked up. Big Jim Foley nodded curtly.

"That's right. Logical, common sense loggin', if you ask me. It's claimed that the best you can hope for is a long jerkline haul of your entire cut, if you can get permission to make trail through the T-Slash. It don't look good, Stewart. Unless you've got some crazy miracle tucked away some place."

"He's right, Lance," Mac Conway cut in, his forehead ridged and grooved in a permanent frown of concern. "I've been pretty patient my ownself. I think your works at the mill are encouragin', but I'd like to know what I can expect from here on in?"

Lance shot a swift glance at Grif Maunder who had been lunching with him. Grif winked and slowly shook his head. This gave Lance encouragement. He was sure Grif was signaling him not to tip his hand even to Conway. Now Lance turned sharply to Foley.

"It's possible I have a miracle tucked away someplace," he said, then smiling, he turned to Conway.

"I can understand your feelings, Mac. But I'm not ready to talk. If things go as I hope they will, I'll beat Prescott's run by plenty, jerkline or no jerkline. I'll tell you this much, both of you—I may have to haul jerkline part of the distance to the Foley railroad spur, but—" Lance broke off, as if weighing each word to come carefully—"if I'm not at that spur with my first deliveries ahead uh the Prescott outfit, I'll—" He stopped. He picked a piece of beef from his steak and for a long moment chewed it while he stared out through the open doorway. His eyes flicked as he glimpsed a robin hopping on the stoop. Spring! Shrugging, he turned to Conway again.

"You gave me a free hand up here, Mac," he said sharply. "I'm well ahead of schedule, in spite of everything the Prescott curly wolves have done to block us. If I told you what I have in mind, it would no longer be a secret. Only three of my own men know. That's all I can say. If you still ain't satisfied, you'd best come up an' take over—ramrod your own works, an' there'll be no hard feelin's. But while I'm runnin' the job, I don't want any more of this doubt, understand?"

Conway and Foley exchanged meaning glances. The big construction boss now grinned wide and laid a big hand on Lance's shoulder.

"Okay, son, okay," he said in gruff good humor. "The best of luck to you. You've pulled a miracle a'ready, beat down an almighty lot uh doubt I had. Go ahead an' I'll help you all I can. You got sand enough to stand by your convictions. You've worked a crew of cowhands an' peelers into a smart loggin' outfit; and now—uh—how about some of those thick juicy steaks?"

Lance grinned as he called in the cook and placed orders.

"Make 'em thick porterhouses, Sourdough; medium rare with lots of hash brown an'—pie."

They settled down, four big frontier bigwoodsmen with a better understanding of each other, yet Lance continued to guard his secret. He was ready to spud in at the canyon barrier.

CHAPTER V

The Big Shoot

WITH a crew of four spudders, Lance started the coyote work at the rock barricade. They worked like cougars in the nights while patrolling the area, a cocked gun ready, Grif Maunder cat-footed over the area topside.

The work progressed for some time without cause for alarm. Lance was encouraged by everything. Tonight, however, Lance was startled when Grif Maunder came down to draw him to one side.

"I seen a critter slinkin' through the underbrush up above there, Lance," Grif

advised softly. "Couldn't be shore, but I'm afraid it was a man critter. We'd best hang around till dawn, which ain't far off, an' check up for tracks. If it's a man, it's plumb bad, pardner."

Lance's face twisted in a bitter grin. He had not forgotten that he was actually trespassing on T-Slash property.

At daybreak Lance and Grif searched the area above. They found tracks, all right, tracks which caused alarm. They were man tracks, and obviously the tracks of a man who wore riding boots.

They followed the tracks down to the bottomland and shortly though not wholly to Lance's amazement they glimpsed the slim form of Mace Burton, owner of the T-Slash in a clump of wolf willow to which he'd tied his horse. Lance jumped the rancher quickly.

"You've been doin' some spyin', Burton," Lance charged. "What's the idea? You workin' all out with the Prescott outfit?"

Burton's mouth twitched. His rheumy eyes now opened wide.

"I'm just protectin' my interests, Stewart," he answered crisply. "Soon's you stopped buyin' my beef I figured you'd got salt on yore tail—mad, I reckon because I give Dave Prescott rights to flood part uh my hayland. Next I found you was in cahoots with ol' Nester Nolan, an' that give me ideas. So I come up lookin', an' what do I find?"

"Yeah, Burton, what do you find?"

Grif Maunder started. He'd never heard Lance's voice ring with that strange, deadly tone before. The big trouble shooter had strode up to within a couple of feet of the rancher.

"You cain't fool me, Stewart," the old man replied. "You're makin' ready to blow the big slide at the canyon. You figger on fillin' the Nolan crick which, if it works, will raise Cain with the Prescott plans down the main stream."

Burton broke off. There was something in Lance's expression that startled him.

"So what about it, Burton?" Lance asked coldly. "You've just about sold out to the Prescott bunch, which means they've got you hog-tied. What do you figure on doin' about what you've discovered?"

Mace Burton was wise. He was also afraid. He realized he was facing a husky young logger boss who was desperately determined to carry out a plan for victory.

"Okay, Stewart," Burton said at last. "You win. I know when I'm licked. Go ahaid an' I'll keep buttoned up. Don't figure I've got a squar' deal from the Prescotts nohow. I—"

Lance made an involuntary movement forward, but checked himself. He didn't trust Burton in any degree. The rancher was lying, he knew.

"You double-crossed the North Fork outfit out of some spite against the Conways, Burton," he charged. "You even carried your spite so far as to ruin a lot of valuable hayland not for one year or two, but perhaps for the next ten years. Now your double-cross is spittin' back at you. But listen—you were right. We're blowin' that barricade at the canyon and if the Prescotts get wind of it, it'll have come from you."

Standing near by, Grif Maunder pulled his heavy Colt and started spinning the cylinder. Burton stared, bug-eyed.

"Okay, Stewart," he said, swallowing hard. "But don't figger Dave Prescott's asleep. And there's a big jasper name uh Janson who ain't forgot a whuppin' you gave him. I been hearin' things down to the Prescott mill." Burton turned and headed toward his horse.

Lance and Maunder watched him mount and ride off, then Grif touched Lance on an arm.

"You'd best start really pushin' the works, Lance," he said. "I don't trust that ol' geezer none. We throwed a scare into him, but he ain't so scairt as he tried to let on. Mebbe we—"

Grif broke off as a meadow lark piped musically from an old dry cottonwood stump near by.

"I'm a son of a gun if spring ain't here," Grif said. Lance smiled softly and nodded. Together they headed back toward the creek.

THE night of the big shoot Lance rode in on a powder wagon bound for the barricade. He had had crews build subbarricades here and there along the creek, just in case the freed water from the main river was more than the creek could carry. He figured to block it gradually. When it found a natural course, it would

wash out the barricades and all would be well.

Lance got down from the wagon and with his men moved on to the rock and clay face of the big slide. All charges were spudded in. There remained only the connection of lead wires which stretched back to two plunger batteries at the back of a ridge at a safe distance.

Lance inspected every lead hook-up carefully, and as they worked he shivered at the roar of the flood water in the main canyon. It's thunder struck Lance's eardrums as a mockery, a terrific, frightening challenge.

Red Bain, chief powderman, yelled that all was okay. Hearts beating savagely, the crew hurried back to the plunger batteries, where Red stooped to connect the leads.

Suddenly a bullet whined by. Almost instantly three terrific explosions shattered the quiet of early dawn. Lance leaped to his feet.

"The sub-barricades have been blown!" he roared. "The measly Prescotts have—" He broke off as Grif Maunder joined him.

"That might be bad, Lance, but they's on'y one thing left—our shoot. Dave Prescott figgers by blowin' them sub-barriers he can flood us at the mill. Best send a man down to Canthook fast."

Lance Stewart quivered with rage. He was sure old Mace Burton had tipped the Prescotts off. Now he swung and raised a hand to the two men at the batteries.

"Stan' by! Count of five. Ready?" he yelled. "One — two — three — four — *F-i-r-e!*" Two sets of hands jammed the plungers down and men flattened. For a split second the ground seemed to quiver like a huge jelly, then suddenly the whole area seemed to erupt at a bright flash of flame and a detonation that almost numbed the eardrums of Lance's men to deafness.

Tons of rock and rubble screamed earthward to thump down hard on every hand. Now Lance raised his head, listening. He clutched at Grif's arm.

"Hear it?" he whispered.

There came a vicious hissing sound, and then a terrific roar as the leaping white water broke the last barrier.

Lance swung to Grif again.

"I hate to think what'll happen when it hits the big bend near the mill, Grif."

Lance was afraid it would rush on, smashing a new course to the south.

They were turning to hit for the wagon when suddenly Grif pitched to his face. A rifle spat. Lance flattened, jerking out his gun. Slowly, he raised his head to glimpse a heavy man running in a half crouch along the creek bank. There was no mistaking that figure, even in the half light.

"Janson!" Lance's voice sounded in a half sob as he got to his feet. He lunged in behind a clump of willows, jerking up his six-gun. He fired two sharp snap shots at the running form. Janson straightened, turning, throwing his rifle to his shoulder. He etched himself in sharp silhouette and Lance knew before he squeezed his trigger that Janson's logging days were done.

Janson's Winchester exploded harmlessly as he whirled and pitched headlong into the terrible white water. Men were loading the wounded Maunder on to the wagon as Lance joined them.

"Okay, boys," he said. "Whip 'em up!"

A line end flicked out and the team lunged into the collars.

BACK at the mill, Lance found old Canthook Cassidy booming orders in every direction. Crouched at Canthook's side, pumping a Winchester, was big Mac Conway.

"You shore as hades blowed the lid off ever'thin' in Wyomin' up at the canyon, son," Canthook said with a thick chuckle.

"Sure enough," Mac Conway added. "Listen to her come, Lance. Listen to that water—hell-bent white water an' it's lucky for you, for us, ol' Canthook had the good sense to build a blockade at the bend."

"A—what?" Lance half rolled onto his side.

"That's it," Mac returned. "Worked on it three days—heavy squared timbers. Now it's here—the water's here, Lance."

A shudder passed through Lance's body as he heard the charging water rush on through the mill area. He'd made it, but now Canthook was growling. Prescott raiders were shooting again.

They fired together and a man screamed as he pitched from the roof of the engine house.

Later Red Bain came up with news that old Mace Burton, wounded, was lying at the foot of the engine house wall.

"He won't die," Red went on, "but he's shore goin' to be sorry for hisself. Now what, Lance?"

"All hands on the drive, Red! I reckon the shootin's all over."

Daylight broke to reveal the full creek running fast. Men worked like fiends with canthook, peavey and pike pole, and shortly Lance Stewart leaped to the deck of the first big timber raft. He had arranged for the hired jerkline outfits to be ready for the haul up where the creek would flood an old alkali flat at its original mouth.

Cowhands, converted to bigwoods buckaroos almost overnight, yelled at one another as Lance rode his raft up to the loading area where skidways, with blocks and tackle, were set up for loading.

Mac Conway came riding through on the second raft. He stood with Lance and watched the first of the jerkline wagons loaded. Then they both climbed aboard as the ten-team outfit stretched into the collars.

They sat in silence on the load until, as their trail now paralleled the main river, they glimpsed Dave Prescott and a few men standing on the far bank watching them. Dave Prescott did not glance up for long. His head was down, his eyes glaring at the fallen river, which had been robbed of a lot of its force.

Now two riders hove into view and shortly Jim Foley was hailing Lance and Mac. The jerkline skinner pulled his outfit to a halt at a call from Lance.

Lance and Mac dropped to the ground where Foley shook hands.

"Smartest job I ever saw, Stewart. Mac," he said, "you're all in the clear now, and you'll find a lot uh help at the spur. Uh—how would you like a job with our outfit, Stewart?" There was no grin on Foley's face now. He was in earnest. But Mac Conway butted in, with a wide smile.

"I think not Jim," he said. "Lance is goin' to sign up with the North Fork outfit, permanent, as general woods manager. Isn't that right, Lance? I mean a pardnership, of course."

Lance Stewart squared his big shoulders. His eyes began to dance as he looked from Foley to Conway. He suddenly nodded.

"That's right, Mac," he answered. "But on certain conditions. I want the right to hold certain men, permanent: Canthook Cassidy, Grif Maunder, Red Bain and others. And there's one other important condition. Old Nester Nolan. We're makin' him a present of enough lumber to build a new house and stable. And what's more, we're havin' a buildin' bee. We're goin' to fix up the ol' feller's place right."

Mac Conway shrugged and laughed good naturedly.

"You're the boss from here on in, Lance. I'll be leavin' you to it. I've got a lot of cruisin' to do, come the first uh next week. But I'll be back in time for the shindig."

"The—shindig, Mac?" Lance's brows flicked up.

"Shore enough, son," Jim Foley cut in. "You cain't wind up a buildin' bee without a doin's uh some sort, an' count me in on it. Now I got to be goin'. Call in at Cody, Mac. I'll have your check releases ready."

The men climbed back aboard the high load and Lance signalled to the skinner. *"H'yah-h-h-h-h-h-h!"* Traces grew taut. Horses snuffled as they stretched into the collars.

Lance Stewart sat back and lazily twisted a cigarette while Mac Conway tapped an accompaniment to an old hoedown tune he was humming, now and then casting sly glances at the big form of his trouble shooter, his pardner.

Follow the Exciting Exploits of Ranger Jim Hatfield in RED RIVER RULE, a novel by Jackson Cole in June TEXAS RANGERS—15c at all stands!

WHERE BUZZARDS FLY

Bowdrie fired at the riders

A Ranger provides a big surprise for Border folks when he lifts the veil of secrecy from a ranch of mystery!

A Chick Bowdrie Story

by **LOUIS L'AMOUR**

THE Mexican's rifle lay over the horse's body, his Colt near his hand. He had gone out fighting, riddled with bullets. His flat, knife-scarred face was unforgettable, his eyes wide and unafraid, staring into the brassy sky.

"Well, Zaparo," "Chick" Bowdrie muttered, "it looks like they washed out yore trail!"

His eyes swept the narrow, gray gravel and sand trail that followed the bottom of the arroyo, littered now with the bodies of men and horses, all dead.

Fourteen men had gone out fighting,

fourteen killed in what must have been the space of a few minutes. These had been hard, desperate men who lay here, and they would not have gone easily. It had been an ambush, of course, perfectly planned, perfectly timed.

The mind which had conceived this was a mind to reckon with, cold, cruel, and utterly ruthless. The smooth efficiency of the thing had been deadly. Chick rolled a smoke and stared bleakly at the litter of bodies scattered over the three hundred yards of trail. Above them, in slow, patient circles, buzzards were flying.

Yesterday afternoon there had been a moment here of lead-laced inferno, flashes of gunfire, and the close thunder of heavy rifles. After that, a few scattered words, the sound of departing hoofs, then silence and the buzzards.

Zaparo had moved fast after looting the missions and the ranches, and he had moved along a planned route. But someone had sold him out, and other men, even more bloodthirsty than he, had waited here with a welcome of gunfire.

Bowdrie's hard, swarthy young face was expressionless as he stared down the arroyo. Unless he could no longer read sign, the betrayer had here been betrayed. That last Mexican, who had hung back behind the others, was dead too. But the man ahead of him had been shot in the back at close quarters. The mind that had planned this had no idea of trusting the betrayer, and had killed him along with the rest.

For three hours Chick Bowdrie had studied the scene with care. Other rangers had said of Bowdrie that he could trail a snake across a flat rock, but here he was stumped.

No cartridge shells remained, no cigarette butts. All had been gathered with painstaking care. Every track had been brushed out with a piece of mesquite. There was, in all that area, not one iota of evidence, not one clue or suggestion of a clue. Yet there is no such thing as a perfect crime. There are only imperfect investigators.

SEATED on a flat rock, a cigarette in his fingers, Chick brooded over the situation.

Obviously, the killers had known well in advance, for this ambush had been well-chosen, the route of Zaparo definitely known. There had been seven men lying in ambush. Seven, at least. That much Chick knew. Those seven must necessarily be seven of the deadliest marksmen on the Border. They had been facing, even from cover, fourteen men who could and would fight. Hence, the seven must have been chosen, they must have been selected.

There, Chick decided, was his first clue.

He could not trail these killers, these robbers of thieves, on the ground. So he would trail them with his mind.

Seven dangerous, hard-as-nails men, killers all. To lead them a man would have to be harder, colder, more certain than they. He would have to be able to handle the other six, he would have to enjoy their confidence. Such men were rare.

Looking over, in his mind, the worn pages of his rangers' fugitive list, he could find no name that fitted. John Wesley Hardin was cold enough, and killer enough, but he would trust to luck and a fast gun to get away with it. This man had trusted to nothing.

He must find out what men were where. If necessary he must sort out from many bad men the few who might take part in such an affair as this, then trail down each one until he found a place where seven men had come together.

There was another way.

Back there on the trail was a Mexican, the betrayer. He was dead, but perhaps his betraying was not at an end.

Chick swung into the saddle and walked his horse down that line of dead men and horses until he came to the last. Zaparo was no longer important. This dead man was.

Swinging down, Chick went through the dead Mexican's pockets. Nothing had been disturbed. The man's name was Juan Piron. He was short, thick, and had a ragged scar over his eyebrow. He had ridden a mouse-colored mustang with one white stocking. He looked tough, mean, and hard to get along with.

If Juan Piron had betrayed Zaparo, he had betrayed him to someone he knew, someone he believed could cope with the bandit chief. At sometime in the past few days, Piron had contacted this killer boss, or one of his men. There lay the only chance. To trail Juan Piron, to check on everyone he knew, to find out every place he had gone.

Mounting his hammer-headed roan, Chick let the long-legged horse turn back up the arroyo trail. The roan adopted his own pace, a shambling, loose-limbed trot, and miles began to fall behind.

Zaparo's gang had looted two missions and some Mexican ranches of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in gold, silver and money. The rurales had reported to the Texas Rangers that Zaparo was headed north. The rurales had met Zaparo before, and had no desire to repeat the action. Let the rangers have them.

The Texas Rangers, as usual, had business of their own. Captain McNelly sent Chick Bowdrie, just one ranger, to handle the job.

When it was nearly dusk he rode into the wide, clean-swept ranchyard of Tom Katch's K Bar. A couple of the hands loafed in front of the bunkhouse, and Katch himself, a big, easy-going man with hard yet friendly eyes, was lounging on the wide veranda. Rangers made a habit of stopping in at the K Bar, for there was always hot coffee to be had, a place to sleep and a meal.

"Howdy, Chick!" Katch waved at him lazily. "What brings yuh down thisaway?"

Bowdrie shrugged. "Zaparo."

"That Mexican on the rampage again? Somebody should do somethin' about him."

"Somebody has. He's dead."

"The devil yuh say!" Tom Katch sat up and began to stoke his pipe. "Dead, huh? Tell me about it."

Briefly, Bowdrie explained. A young Mexican girl brought him a cup of coffee and he dropped his hat on the floor.

"Clean job, looks like," he added. "Not a speck of trail."

"Hey, boys!" Katch called. "Zaparo's dead!"

The hands trooped up to the porch. The first one seated himself on the steps. He was all wire and whipcord, a hard-faced, tough-looking youngster. "Guess I ain't met you," he said, grinning at Chick. "My name's Ferd Cassidy!"

"Shore." Katch waved a hand at the others. "Hawkins, Broughten, Werner and Cadieux. Top hands, ever' one of 'em, and Ranger, they have to prove it on this spread!"

Cassidy grinned. "He works the daylights out of his help! Lucky yuh got a job that beats punchin' cows!"

"Who yuh reckon done it?" Hawkins asked. He was a bald-headed man with a rocklike face.

Chick shrugged. "Couldn't guess. It don't fit anybody I know. Must be a new gang operatin'."

"Mebbe another Mexican outfit trailed 'em?" Broughten suggested.

"Could be," Chick agreed. He hesitated. "Any of you hombres seen a Mexican around? Short, stocky, with a scar over one eye?"

Hawkins' face seemed to stiffen. "No, can't say's I have," he said.

"Lots of 'em around!" Katch said. "Might be any one of 'em! Never could tell much about 'em, myself. . . ."

AT DAYBREAK Bowdrie rolled out of bed, washed up in a basin of cold water that stood on the bench in his room, then dried himself and pulled on his clothes. The young Mexican girl had pressed his trousers as he had requested, and they lay over the back of a chair.

He got into them, drew on his boots, and wiped the dust from his silver spurs. Then his checked shirt of black and white, a black neckerchief, and he looked at himself in the mirror, grinned at his vanity before he turned and buckled on his guns. He slid each Colt from its holster and checked the cylinders. Each was loaded with five cartridges.

When he had eaten a hasty breakfast, he walked outside and saddled the roan, Katch waved at him from the porch, then got up and idled down his way. Tom Katch was six-feet-four and weighed about two hundred and thirty.

"Listen," he said. "If there's anything we can do, let us know. That Cassidy, my foreman, is a good man on a trail, and he likes a good fight. All of us are ready to take a hand if yuh need us. Sounds like a hard bunch yuh're buckin'!"

"Thanks!" Chuck grinned at him, touched a spur to the roan, and loped out to the trail.

Once he had reached the trail, he slowed the roan to a walk. He had little with which to work, only the knowledge of the hard bunch it must have required, and the Mexican who had betrayed his friends. Yet the pack-mules, of which there must have been a dozen, would have to be disposed of, and the loot

hidden. Such a body of men and pack animals could not go far without being seen.

Mentally he drew a map of the region, bounded on the south by the river, and with the arroyo of the dead bandits as a center. North and west of that arroyo lay range that was traversed by cowhands from the K Bar; south to the river it was desert where few men traveled. East, there were twenty miles of rough country, then the town of Pasamonte. Yet there was something else. Not over eight miles from the arroyo was the *cantina* of Pedro Padilla.

Chick's eyes squinted thoughtfully. The *cantina* was an interesting place. Built upon the ruins of an ancient mission, the *cantina* utilized two walls and the floor of an ancient building. A new roof, two new walls, and a large patio had been added. The *cantina* was a favored stopping place for cowhands, wet Mexicans fresh from slipping over the Rio Grande, and all manner of wayfarers. Short of Pasamonte it was the only place a man could get a drink.

If anything was to be learned, there could be no better place to begin than Padilla's *cantina*.

What had he to learn?

Who was the leader of the killers? Where had they gone from the arroyo? Where had Juan Piron met the leader? How had he transmitted his information to him when the critical moment arrived? By what route had the killers arrived at the arroyo?

All of it might turn on Piron himself. That Mexican was the one link between the bandits and their murderers.

The *cantina* basked in a hot desert sun. A long, low, rambling building, it surrounded the patio on all four sides. Three sides with the *cantina* and the living quarters of Padilla and his family; the other side, a stable. The *cantina* itself was in a large, low-raftered room with a floor of freshly-swept flags. There were a dozen tables, a bar, an *olla* of fresh water with a gourd dipper, and strings of peppers everywhere.

Padilla was a squat, paunchy Mexican with a large black mustache, and a wary eye. He wore a huge, old-fashioned pistol.

Chick swung down from the roan and led the mount into the stable where he stripped off the saddle and rubbed the animal down with a handful of grass. Then he watered him, and returned him to the stable and some hay.

Hat in hand, he strolled across the stone-flagged patio, conscious of the babble of Spanish from the watching women of Padilla. Pedro had three daughters, four granddaughters, and a wife as large as any three, including Padilla himself.

Bowdrie dropped into a chair in the cool shade of the *cantina,* and Pedro brought him a glass of *tequila.*

"Sit down," Chick said, speaking in Spanish, "and have one yourself!"

Pedro needed no urging. He tasted the fiery *tequila,* smacked his lips, and opened a desultory conversation on the heat, the poor fee for cattle, the roan horse the señor rode, and the trials of running a *cantina* so far from the law.

Bowdrie nodded agreement. "No doubt," he added casually, "many bad men come this way as well as good. You are close to the Border!"

"*Si!*" Padilla hunched his shoulders and thrust his head toward Bowdrie, his black eyes intense. "They come, they spend money, they go! Sometimes they have drinks and do not pay!"

ONE of Padilla's daughters, a girl named Chiquita, had come into the room and was sweeping the floor. Chick watched her for a few minutes.

"Juan Piron, he comes often to this place?" he said then carelessly.

His eyes were only accidentally upon the girl with the broom, but she stiffened so suddenly that every sense was immediately alert. She was sweeping again now. She was also listening.

"Piron?" Padilla hesitated over the reply. "I know nothing of such a man, señor. He works near here?"

Chick shrugged. "If you call it work. He is, I think, the *bandido,* but that is his business."

These people knew something of Piron, and Chick had been able to guess at the manner of man Padilla was. In his mind, he put the two together. Padilla and Piron? No. But, Padilla and Zaparo? Yes.

"Too bad about Zaparo," he said, lifting his glass. He took a gulp of the *tequila,* and replaced the glass in its own wet ring on the table top. The broom was moving slowly now.

"Too bad?" Padilla was cautious. "The señor refers, perhaps, to Zaparo, the *bandido?*"

"*Si.* It is too bad he was killed."

The broom handle hit the floor, and Chick looked up. The girl stared at him, wide eyed.

"Zaparo?" she exclaimed. "His men, señor? They were killed too?"

"*Si,* all fourteen of them—wiped out."

Padilla was staring at him wildly, and the girl had dropped on her knees by the table.

"The young one, señor!" she pleaded. "Do not tell me the young one is dead! He with the so curly hair! With the smile, the—"

Chick scowled. His memory was good, and no such Mexican had been with them. "No, Chiquita," he said. "Fourteen men were dead, and Zaparo among them, all shot down."

"The rurales, señor?" Padilla's face was hard.

"No, *amigo,*" Chick replied. "Other *bandidos.* I think gringo outlaws." He turned his black eyes and searched the Mexican's face. "You were a friend of Zaparo, *si*? Now it is of no moment. But it is important I find the killers of Zaparo, you understand? They are bad men, very bad men. I think Juan Piron was their friend. I think he betrayed Zaparo to someone." He caught the Mexican's wrist. "Do you know who that someone was, *amigo?* Have you seen Piron talking, here, with any American?"

The sudden light that flamed in the innkeeper's eyes veiled, and he shrugged.

"Perhaps he talks here, I do not remember."

Chick looked down at the girl, still on her knees beside him.

"Chiquita, if your lover was a man of Zaparo, and if he looked as you have said, he was not among those killed. I remember each face, each man. He was not there."

"*Gracias,* señor!" She got to her feet, her eyes bright with happiness.

Padilla got up from the table, too, and left the room suddenly. Chick caught the girl's hand.

"Chiquita, you can help me. Zaparo was not a good man, but not so bad as some. Yet he stole precious things from two missions in Sonora. Those things must be returned. Your lover was not killed, so soon he will come to you, no? Then send him to me. He can help me."

"You would not betray him, señor? To the rurales? We are to be married soon."

"No, only to talk with him. He has done no crime in my country, but these men who have killed Zaparo, I must find them. . . ."

Chick Bowdrie awakened, hours later, lying across the bed in his room at the *cantina.* Music sounded from the *cantina,* and he rolled up on an elbow and stared out the window. A dozen horses were tied to the hitching rail outside the gate of the patio. From where he lay he could look across the patio and into a lighted window opposite.

The first man he saw was Ferd Cassidy, the foreman of the K Bar, and beside him was the bald-headed Hawkins. Broughten was there, too. This was no doubt the hangout for the K Bar, being only nine or ten miles from the ranch.

He got up, splashed cold water on his face and hair, and combed his hair before picking up his black hat. As he started for the door, a surreptitious movement caught his eye, and he froze in position.

IT WAS the Mexican girl, Chiquita, and she was leading a horse toward the gate! He waited an instant, then opened the door. His side of the patio was in darkness. The girl reached the gate, slipped into the saddle, and walked the horse out and down the trail.

At almost the moment the horse vanished through the gate, the dark figure of a man showed against the lighted window opposite, then vanished. As Bowdrie moved toward the gate himself, he saw a man swing into the saddle and start down the trail after the girl. Where could she be going at this hour? Who was following her?

Wheeling, he raced to the stable and threw the saddle on the roan. Slipping on the bridle and cinching the saddle tighter, he led the horse outside and swung aboard.

The night was starlit, and one could see a short distance, but not far enough. Keeping the roan off the trail to the softer sand alongside, the ranger followed. After a short distance he could see the man up ahead. Then the fellow seemed to vanish.

Worried, Chick reached the spot to find that the desert broke away into the steep bank of a wash. As he started down the side, he saw the outline of a rider against the night, a rider who was some distance away, but who wore no hat. That would be Chiquita. What,

then, had become of her follower?

Glancing left and right, Chick decided the rider had turned up or down the wash. Perhaps this wash intersected the trail further on. He elected to pursue the girl, and rode up the steep opposite side. Before long she turned off the trail and headed out across the desert, yet she rode as though to a goal, and Chick had an idea who she planned to meet.

They rode for an hour, and then ahead of him, Chick saw the tiny eye of a fire. By now they were in a remote region of canyons and weird rock formations where such a fire could not be seen for any distance. Chiquita rode directly to it and slid from the saddle.

Bowdrie studied the terrain around him. What had become of the man who had followed the girl? Had that man realized Chick was behind them?

Slipping from the roan, he tied the animal to a mesquite brush and crept through the cacti and mesquite until he could lie face down behind a rock, well out of sight. He lifted his head and studied the situation.

The young Mexican who held the girl in his arms could only be Zaparo's henchman. They were talking Spanish.

"It is as you feared," she said, evidently in reply to a remark Chick had not overheard. "Something has happened! Zaparo and all of them are killed! They were attacked by some other outlaws!"

"*Zaparo?*" He was incredulous. "Zaparo, too? But who could have known? How could—"

"The gringo with the black hat who looks like an Apache, that one says they were betrayed by Juan Piron!"

"Ah!" From the expression Bowdrie gathered that the young Mexican was not surprised. "But he is dead, too?"

"The gringo says all are dead. Even Piron was killed by these others. And they have the loot!"

"I care nothing for the loot!" the young Mexican exclaimed angrily. "But Zaparo! There was a man! He was my friend, and to be betrayed by such a one!"

"The gringo wishes to talk to you. He promises you no harm. He wants only to learn about the gringo outlaws."

The Mexican shrugged. "But I know nothing, Chiquita!"

Their voices became lower, and they talked softly. Then, after only a few minutes more, the girl got back into saddle, leaving a package of food with the man. After a long embrace, she turned her horse away into the darkness.

Chick Bowdrie was in a quandary. Here was his chance to talk to the Mexican, and there might not be another. On the other hand, the unknown rider would probably follow the girl. Had that rider overheard, too? Or had he even followed this far?

He made his decision quickly. He would do both.

Rising from behind the stone, he said softly, hoping his voice would carry no further than the young Mexican:

"Stand very still, señor! I am a friend."

The man rooted himself in his tracks, his head turning slowly.

"I am the gringo Chiquita mentioned," Chick continued. "I must talk with you, but we must ride, also, for Chiquita is in danger!"

"In danger?" The young man relaxed suddenly. "As you will. I shall get my horse."

WARILY, Chick watched him go, then circled the fire, but if there had been another watcher, he was gone.

"Leave the fire," Chick said. He had returned to the roan, and he rode up as the young Mexican hastily cinched up. "Let us go!"

As they rode down the canyon, he asked, "What do you know of Piron?"

"He was a cousin of Zaparo, but a bad man. We did not trust him, and I followed him once where he met two men, but I could not see their faces. Zaparo could not believe he was a traitor."

"How did you happen to remain behind?"

"My father, señor, he is ill. When he became better, I rode to see Chiquita, also to find what had happened to Zaparo."

Suddenly, ahead of them, they heard a scream, quickly choked off. The Mexican rammed the spurs into the side of his mount and was gone at a dead run. There was nothing for Bowdrie to do but follow.

He saw them suddenly, two struggling figures in the road, but as the sound of their horses rushed up on the pair, the man hurled the girl from him and grabbed for his gun. Chick's gun barked, and the man let out a grunt of pain and

fury, dropping his pistol.

Chick and the young Mexican hit the ground together, but Chick grasped the wounded man. He had been drilled high on the right side. Chick had shot for his gun hand, but had had only a blur of movement at which to aim.

Chiquita was moaning to her Pablo, and Chick swung the wounded man around, holding a gun on him, and striking a match with a flip of his thumb nail. It was Hawkins.

"What in thunderation yuh jumpin' me for?" Hawkins demanded. "Can't an hombre have a little fun with a gal without you hornin' in?"

"He can't when the girl don't want him to!" Bowdrie said. "Yuh asked for it, Hawkins!"

"Yuh got a nerve!" Hawkins exploded. "Helpin' one of that Zaparo's gang rather'n an American!"

The moon, which had lifted its top over the mountains, gave some light to the scene, and Bowdrie glanced thoughtfully at Hawkins. How had Hawkins known Pablo was one of Zaparo's gang? If he had ever heard it, of course, but—

Bowdrie picked up the fallen gun and thrust it into his waistband.

"Mount up," he said. "We'll ride back to the *cantina*. And you, Hawkins, can consider yoreself a prisoner."

"Huh?" The wounded man wheeled on him furiously. "Me? A prisoner? For what?"

Chick Bowdrie looked at him. "Get on yore hoss," he said coldly. "I think yuh're just the man I've been lookin' for!"

He could not see the bald-headed man's eyes, but he sensed some change in the face. The stiffness went out of Hawkins' muscles and he looked at Chick, then turned abruptly and climbed into the saddle.

"So?" he said finally.

He spoke not another word all the way back to the *cantina*, nor would he talk when Chick handcuffed him to the bed in one of Padilla's rooms. Chick left him there, and strolled across the patio. A half-dozen hangers-on still loafed about. Ferd Cassidy was one of them, and Broughten was watching a poker game.

Cassidy kept glancing around, and Chick nodded to him. "When yuh get ready to go," he said, "don't wait for Hawkins. He's under arrest."

Broughten turned sharply, and Cassidy put his glass down on the table where he sat.

"What's he done?" Cassidy asked.

"Well, he followed one of Padilla's girls out in the desert and got rough with her. Also—" Chick picked up the bottle and filled his glass— "I think I'd better talk to him on some other matters."

"What matters?" Cassidy was smiling, but there was a cold bitter light in his eyes.

It hit Chick all of a sudden. "Why didn't I think of that?" he asked himself. "The K Bar crowd! Tough as mulehide and mean as a bunch of sidewinders!" Still, so far as he knew, none of them had ever done anything of the kind before.

A man came in the door from the road and glanced around, his gray eyes taking in the tableau with casual interest. He was blond, wiry, and rugged-looking. He dropped into a chair near the door, and nobody seemed to notice him.

"Just a little investigation," Chick said. "Hawkins knew that Pablo, Chiquita's Mexican boy friend, had been a member of the Zaparo outfit. I'm just curious as to how he knows."

THE room was very still. Two Mexican cowhands vanished through the door, and an old man with gray chin whiskers finished his drink and began nonchalantly to ease himself off the griddle on which they were all suddenly squatting.

"Thought yuh said all of Zaparo's boys was dead?" Cassidy suggested.

"I thought they were, but it seems they were checkin' up on Piron, the same as I've been. It seems—" Chick let his cold black eyes rest on Cassidy's— "that Piron was havin' some conferences with some gringos. It didn't smell so good to some of Zaparo's boys."

Cassidy shrugged.

"Well, don't hold him longer'n yuh have to," he said. "The boss needs him. Let's go, Broughten!"

They walked out, and after a moment Chick heard the sound of their horses as they rode away. He finished his drink, running over the matter in his mind. There was small chance that Hawkins would talk, and there was an even better chance that this was a grab in the dark, that the cowhand knew nothing.

Chick Bowdrie had a sudden, unhappy

feeling that he was making a fool of himself. Certainly, after this, his welcome at the K Bar would not be so free and easy. Ranches were notoriously clannish, and a move against one of their men was a move against all. Yet he could not rid himself of the idea that he had a finger-hold on the solution.

He turned and walked from the *cantina,* crossing the patio to his room. As he reached the door he heard a sudden scurry of movement inside. Whipping out his gun he flung the door open and sprang in. He was just in time to see Hawkins going through the window. Springing across the room he made a grab for the man with his left hand.

He grabbed the corner of a pocket and it ripped. Something tinkled on the floor and the pocket tore away from the pants and Hawkins fell outside. The bald-headed man scrambled to his feet, and Chick was sure he heard a low voice, speaking to the outlaw. Then Chick sprang through the window.

A gun flashed, and he fired, then fired again at the indistinct shapes of riders off in the darkness. Two guns barked and a bullet nicked his arm, spoiling his last shot. Another gun barked, but there was no gun flash in his direction.

Carefully he moved out over the desert. There was moonlight now, but the light was indistinct. Finally he could see the body of a man lying on the ground ahead of him. All around was bathed in pale, greenish light crossed and barred with the shadows of the suhuaro cactus.

Kneeling, he struck a match. The dead man was Hawkins, and a glance was enough to tell him the story. His bullet had hit Hawkins low down, but had left him alive. Someone else, despairing of getting the wounded man away, had held a pistol to his head and blown his brains out!

Men came running from the *cantina,* and Padilla and Pablo were quickly beside him. Chick indicated the powder burns on the man's head.

"They killed him," he said, "so he wouldn't talk! This man was one of 'em!"

In his room once more he lighted a candle and looked around. Something had fallen to the floor, yet the first thing he noticed was the handcuffs. The lock had been opened either with a key, or picked!

A gleam caught his eyes and he knelt, retrieving the bright object from under the edge of the bed. It was a gold ring with an amethyst setting—a ring that had been part of the loot described as coming from the ranches robbed by Zaparo!

Hawkins, evidently thinking of Chiquita, had held the ring out to use as a gift for her.

Chick wheeled. They would have to work fast now. He crossed the patio on the run. The blond man was at the bar now.

"Rip!" Chick said. "How many are with yuh?"

"Deming and Armstrong."

"Get 'em and come on the run for the K Bar! If there's a fight this time it will be somethin' to write yore girl about!"

Chick threw the saddle on the roan and then mounted. He swung the horse into the trail and started fast for the K Bar. He knew his horse, and after that fast start he let the roan take his own speed. The horse knew his rider well enough to know when speed was required, and he hit the road now at a fast canter.

The K Bar outfit might try to bluff it out, or they might not even expect further trouble. What he was hoping was that they would try to move the loot or get to it. The ranch was the logical place for it, of course. It was one of the few places the mules could have been taken without attracting undue attention. Pack animals in that number do not just drop out of sight.

"Rip" Coker would be along with the other two Rangers. He had spotted the ranger the moment he had entered the *cantina,* and had realized that McNelly had sent him to give Chick help he would need.

WHEN he drew near the K Bar, he slowed the roan to a walk, keeping to the soft shoulder of the road and hoping a hoof wouldn't strike stone. The other rangers had not far to come and should arrive within a few minutes. There was activity near a stack of hay, and Chick saw that the mules were being loaded. Three men were working at the packs. He could hear one of them cursing. There were lights in the house. Chick slid from his horse and spoke softly to the roan.

"You stay here," he said, "but if I yell, come runnin'!"

The roan hung his head drowsily, already half asleep.

Chick saw the rangers almost a minute later. Three ghostly horsemen who appeared from the shadows of the desert. Swiftly, he explained, then he moved off, trying to keep his spurs from jingling.

When he reached the back of the wellhouse he glanced around quickly, then walked across to the ranchhouse and pulled open the door.

He had been in this house too many times before this not to know his way around.

He walked across the kitchen, hearing the murmur of voices from the living room.

He walked along behind the chairs in the big dining room and stopped by the open door.

He heard Katch chuckle. "Forget it, Cassidy!" he said. "Yuh're jumpy. If Hawkins is dead, he can't talk. That fool ranger will just think one of his own shots got him. He likes to think he's plumb good with a six-gun!"

"Have it yore own way, Boss," Cassidy said doubtfully. "I think he's got somethin'. After all, he knew about Piron. How did he find that out?"

"Don't get scared," Katch repeated. "This is fool-proof."

He got up and stretched. In the dimly lighted room, he seemed enormous.

"I told the boys to load the stuff so's we could move it," Cassidy said.

Katch brought his arms down slowly. "Yuh what?" he demanded. His voice was level, but there was something so deadly in it that Chick felt his scalp tighten.

"It seemed the thing to do," Cassidy said. "If they should search the place, then they'd find nothing."

Katch's voice was mild. "Why, Ferd, if they did search they'd never look into that haystack. Besides, the rangers know me. I'm their friend, Ferd. If that loot starts paradin' around over the desert in the moonlight, somebody is goin' to see it."

Cassidy had his hands on the big table. "I'll go tell 'em to put it back," he said. "I just acted too pronto."

"Yuh did," Katch agreed. "That's yore trouble, Ferd. Yuh're too jumpy. I don't like men who get jumpy. Yuh're a good man on a job, smooth as silk and cold as ice, but when we ain't workin', yuh're too easy upset. Besides, Ferd, I don't like men who give orders without consultin' me."

"Yuh ain't mad, are yuh, Boss?" Cassidy said.

His face looked sallow in the dim light, and suddenly, Chick knew what was coming. Big Tom Katch was playing with his lieutenant as a cat plays with a mouse. Katch knew how jittery Cassidy was, and he was leading him on, building him up.

"No, I'm not mad, Ferd. Not mad at all." Katch smiled. "I just don't need yuh any longer, Ferd."

The soft words fell into the room and for an instant there was an utter silence as their meaning seemed to sink into Cassidy's brain. Realization hit him like a blow, but no sooner did he get the idea than his hand swept for his gun. And Tom Katch shot him.

He had held the gun all the time on the side that was turned slightly away from Ferd Cassidy, and when the foreman moved, Katch shot him.

CHICK BOWDRIE stepped into the room. The movement was soft, easy. Tom Katch did not hear it. He did not see it. He stared at Cassidy, then holstered his gun.

His eyes lifted then, and he saw the ranger standing just inside the dining room door.

Bowdrie saw the sudden shock brought by his being there, then he saw the slow smile start on Katch's lips. He had to admire the man, for it had taken only that flickering instant to adjust himself to the situation.

"How are yuh, Chick?" he asked. "I've been havin' some trouble with my foreman. It seems him and some of the boys have been doin' some outside jobs I didn't know about."

"It won't work, Tom," Bowdrie said. "Yuh can't pass it off on them alone. Yuh're the boss. Yores is the brain. From the beginnin' I knew there was something I should remember," Chick added. "Somethin' hangin' back in my mind that would be the answer. It didn't come to me till I found the locks on Hawkins' handcuffs had been picked. Then it came to me who Cassidy was. When I knew who he was, I knew who you are."

"Don't tell me I was on yore list of

wanted men," Katch said, smiling. "I never saw Texas till a few years ago, and have lived right here all that time."

"Missouri, Tennessee, Ohio, and Nebraska. Four big jobs, four clean jobs, all clean except for one thing. The hombre who saw yuh on the platform at Dodge. It just happened that a little fat drummer who was standin' there had known yuh in Memphis. Big Tom Caughter, the smartest and toughest crook of 'em all, who never left a witness, and always got away with the loot. Cassidy, of course, was Lonnie Webb. He was a Kansas boy, wasn't he? With a yen for opening locks—other people's locks."

TOM KATCH'S eyes had hardened and grown cold as Bowdrie talked. Chick could see the whole story in his mind. Always before Katch had got away scot free. No trail, no evidence, no one to identify him or anyone with him. Four big jobs, and this was to be the fifth.

Katch shrugged. "Well," he said, "a man can't win all the time, but with the money I have cached away I can be out in a couple of years."

"Sounds easy, doesn't it?" Chick said, "Only yuh're forgettin' the killin' charge."

Katch let his eyes almost close, then opened them wide.

"Yuh mean Zaparo? They can't *prove* I was there. Anyway, few juries would stick a man for killin' a bandit."

"I wasn't talking about Zaparo," Bowdrie said. "I was referrin' to Cassidy. Cold-blooded killin'. Yuh had a sneak gun. I was an eye witness."

"Oh?" Katch looked at him steadily. "So that's the way, it is? Then we don't need yuh for a witness! After you die, who knows about all this?"

"The rangers waitin' outside for my signal." Chick smiled. "Yuh see, they already have yore boys rounded up. Not a shot, was there? I was waitin' to hear —but not one. And now I'll take you."

Katch flashed a hand for his gun and it came up, incredibly fast—only Chick Bowdrie was already shooting. He never even remembered drawing, but he saw Katch's astonishment as he tried to get his gun into line.

The muzzle wavered, and Chick shot again.

"Bowdrie!" Katch said, puzzled. "Yuh beat me! Yuh beat me to the draw!" His knees buckled and he sank to the floor. Blood was staining his shirt. "Well, who'd have believed it!" he said. "Yuh beat me!"

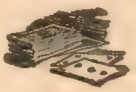
His face twisted, his muscles tightened suddenly, then gave way, and he toppled over on the floor.

Coker was standing in the door. Chick turned his head.

"Get 'em all?" he asked.

"Yeah." Coker stared at the two bodies. "Both of 'em yores?"

Chick shook his head. "That big hombre," he said, "had brains, some education . . . Why can't they realize yuh can never beat the law?"



The Great American Game

AS MUCH a part of the West as horses, spurs and six-guns is the game of poker, but not so well known is the fact that the game comes from France.

The original was a Parisian game known as "Poque." A couple of homesick Frenchmen, bound north on a Mississippi packet taught it to the deckhands and passengers and Poque caught on like a prairie fire.

Yankee tongues converted Poque to Poke and eventually into Poker. Thus was a new game born and a profession of river boat gamblers created at the same time.

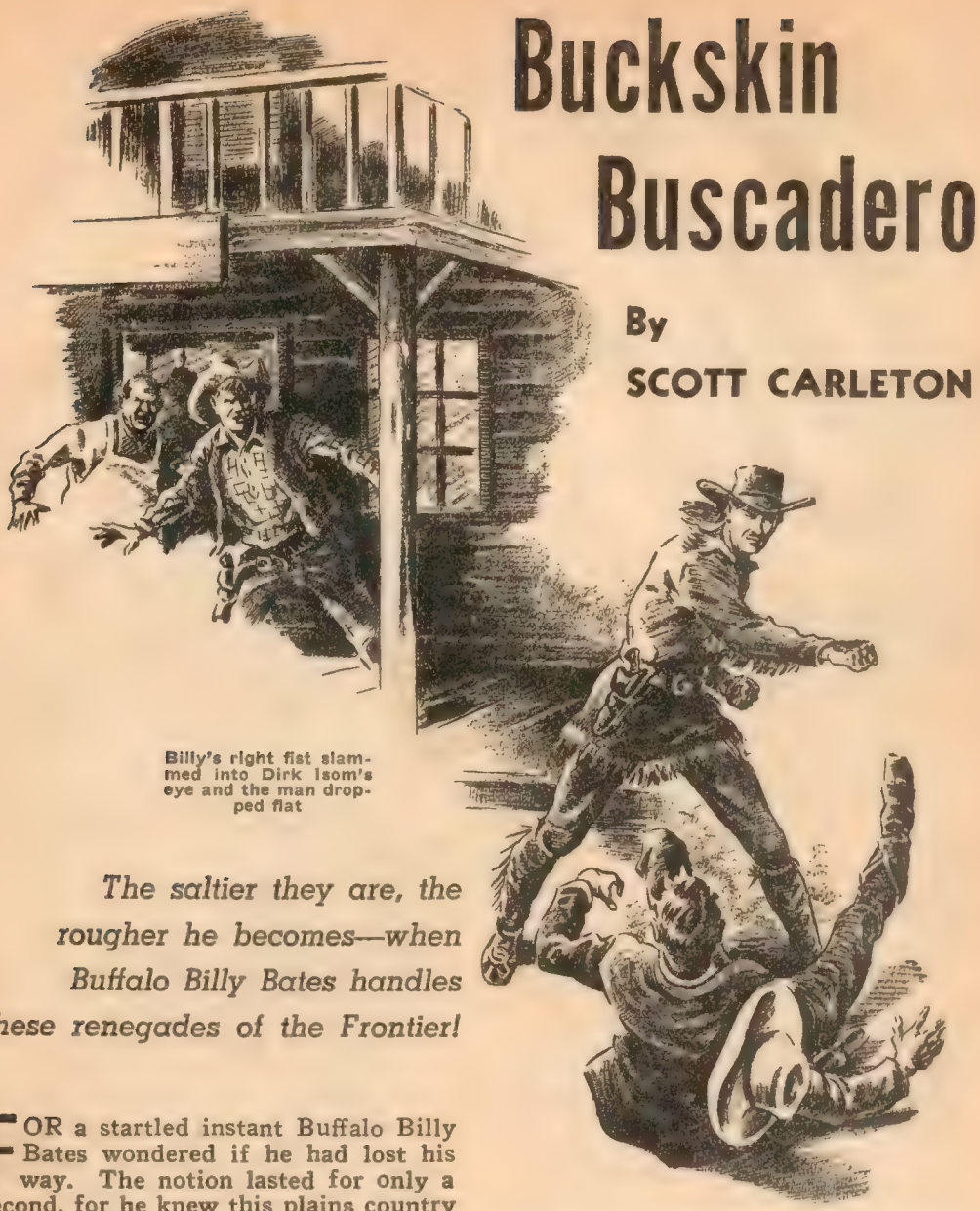
The legend goes on to say that some poker addict once waged his stallion in a game, whence the variation of "Stud" Poker was derived. But we doubt it. In any game of poker, money, boots, saddles, horses—anything is liable to turn up as the stake, and there are no special games to cover any particular type of wager.

Various poker games play an important part in the lore of the West. For example, Wild Bill Hickok was killed while playing a game of poker—and the cards in his hand at the time were Aces and Eights. Thus "Aces and Eights" became known as the "Dead Man's Hand."

—Tex Gainsville.

Buckskin Buscadero

By
SCOTT CARLETON



Billy's right fist slammed into Dirk Isom's eye and the man dropped flat

The saltier they are, the rougher he becomes—when Buffalo Billy Bates handles these renegades of the Frontier!

FOR a startled instant Buffalo Billy Bates wondered if he had lost his way. The notion lasted for only a second, for he knew this plains country as he knew the palms of his own supple hands. Before him, stretching below the ridge where he had suddenly halted his fine bay gelding, spread what Billy knew positively to be Big Sink, a vast swale that stretched for miles through the rolling plains. This was on the fringes of Comanche country. The Big Sink had been shunned by immigrants, cattle drives, traders and freight outfits, for the fierce Comanches brooked no trespassing in their wild and lonely land.

But someone had dared Comanche wrath, for there in the middle of Big Sink lay a village-like cluster of buildings. Beyond, up the fertile sink, Billy's amazed eyes saw several farms, the plowed fields making black squares against the green grass. And south, perhaps three miles down the swale from the little village, Billy's tawny eyes saw a huge herd of cattle, spread out along the sink.

Billy pushed down hard with moccasin clad feet, stretching his stalwart figure stiffly up in the saddle, tawny eyes widening slowly. Wind rattled the fringe on his buckskin garments,

and plucked almost roughly at the shoulder-length chestnut hair that hung down beneath his beaver hat. Under a moustache that was still noticeably silky, Billy's lips parted slowly. Huddled against the east slope of Big Sink, was an army encampment!

"Now this is somethin'!" Billy grumbled suddenly. "Bill Cody tells me to drift down here and see what Lost His Ears is doin' with his spare time. But not a word about a settlement bein' here, nor troops standin' by, did Bill Cody utter. Which means he knew nothin' about this setup, either."

Billy heeled his fleet gelding into motion, slanting down the long slope towards the verdant floor of the sink. He was quartering across towards the army camp, intending to by-pass the settlement and visit the army camp first. But suddenly Billy's tawny eyes narrowed, and a twitch of the reins sent his fleet horse swinging directly towards the village, where a group of almost naked Indian bucks had begun scurrying frantically around a group of tethered ponies.

"Comanches, by thunder!" Billy said under his breath.

THE Indians were chattering like a flock of disturbed geese when Billy Bates rode within hearing, their coppery bodies gleaming wetly with sweat from their frantic activities. But the sharp eyes of Billy Bates had seen a ten gallon keg lashed hastily on a travois, and quickly covered by a buffalo robe. He spotted a similar bulky load on another travois, and noticed still a third as he reined to a halt near the uneasy Comanches.

"He is Long Hair!" one of the Indians said in his native tongue. "He scouts for the white man's army-warriors."

Billy Bates spoke many Indian languages, among them Comanche. But he gave no indication that he had even heard the tall ribby buck speak.

"Crying Hawk feels fear like an old squaw!" a stocky, mean-looking Indian retorted. "He is but a boy, this Long Hair. He sees nothing we do."

Billy put his tall back squarely to the Indians, walking towards a big log building that bulked many times larger than any other structure in the little village. He heard the Indians mount and ride away, but did not even glance around. That those bucks were some of the bunch who herded with Lost His Ears, the scout could easily guess.

Billy stepped inside the building, tawny eyes sweeping the spacious room in quick glances. It was a combination saloon and trading post, he discovered, with a stout partition running across the back. He saw a bald man lazing behind the bar, watching him through puffy lids that almost hid a pair of sullen, dark eyes. A slim, tow-headed man stood at the near end of the bar, pretending to study the amber contents of a glass before him, but actually watching Billy out of cold eyes that were the color of smoke.

A chunky, moon-faced man sat at a table near the bar, idly riffling a deck of cards as he looked up at Billy out of inscrutable gray eyes. Billy felt the tension in the room, and let his right hand ease down close to the butt of the big Dragoon Colt holstered at his thigh.

"It's no pleasure I'm havin' in layin' me eyes on yuh, Billy Bates!" the bald barkeep roared. "For two cents, I'd be blastin' the liver out of yer middle with this here—"

The barkeep's voice ended on a noisy gulp. Billy Bates had flipped the Dragoon out, and was looking coldly into the barkeep's jumpy eyes as he leveled the weapon at him.

"Butch Gorgan, the paddle-foot I caught runnin' guns to the Sioux up in Dakota, two years ago," Billy's voice droned coldly. "Yuh wiggled out, scot free, by namin' the brains of the gun-runnin' outfit you worked with, Butch. Get your hands away from that shotgun under the bar ledge!"

Butch Gorgan stepped back, puffy face pale as dough, hooded eyes shifting uneasily under Billy's cold stare.

"Shotgun?" he gulped. "They's no shotgun under me bar top, Billy Bates!"

"No?" Billy drawled.

He slapped his left hand down hard on the bar top, and was hurtling up and over the cherrywood, to land crouched behind the counter.

"No shotgun under your top, eh?" Billy grunted, and lifted up a muzzle-loading shotgun that had been sawed off to make a short, murderous weapon.

Gorgan's flabby face was working convulsively. Billy pushed his Dragoon into holster, carefully removed the primers from the shotgun, then dropped

the ugly weapon into a barrel of murky water that stood behind the bar.

"Mr. Ford — Mr. Ricker!" Gorgan bawled. "Do somethin' about this bucko, can't ye?"

Billy walked out from behind the bar, keeping an eye on the slim tow-head and the moon-faced man at the table.

"You started the trouble, Gorgan, by reachin' for that shotgun," the tow-head said quietly.

"But Mr. Ford, I tell ye them wolf's eyes of this Billy Bates was a-seein' what thim Injuns—" Gorgan began, but broke off when Ricker, the fat man at the table, stood up, cursing him roughly.

"I'm Sam Ricker, Bates," the fat man said to Billy. "This is Tony Ford, here. We're two of the three partners who own this tradin' post and saloon."

SAM RICKER'S voice was low-toned, almost gentle. His moon face showed no emotion of any kind, and his gray eyes seemed to go over Billy with no more than casual interest.

"Howdy, gents," Billy included both men in the greeting, giving his head a slight nod.

"I've heard of you, Bates," Tony Ford said slowly. "Buffalo Bill Cody raised and educated you, then made a scout and hunter out of you."

"Drink up, Bates," Ricker invited. "Dirk Isom, Tony, and I are partners in this business. Isom will be finished talkin' with Lieutenant Spee any time now, and I want you to meet Isom."

"Lieutenant Spee?" Billy echoed, making no move to touch the glass Ricker had filled for him.

"Lieutenant Tom Spee, in command of the detachment of cavalry camped down the sink a piece," Tony Ford said. "You'd probably be wantin' to see the Lieutenant, eh, Bates?"

"I never even heard of Lieutenant Spee until you and Ricker mentioned him, Ford," Billy said. "I'll likely poke down to his camp, later on, just to see if I know any of the men with him."

"I think Dirk will enjoy talkin' with this young man, Tony," Sam Ricker said pleasantly. "Step back to his office and let him know that Bates is here. Dirk can find some way of shelving Lieutenant Spee for a while, at least."
down here?" Billy asked mildly.

"Has Lost His Ears and his renegade pack been givin' you people trouble

Tony Ford choked on the drink he had been swallowing, coughing violently as he bent over. Sam Ricker's poker face did not change, and his eyes did not betray the surprise he felt.

"Lost His Ears?" Ricker spoke calmly. "You think he may be in the vicinity, Bates?"

"Crying Owl and eight or ten other scalp hungry renegades who herd with Lost His Ears were out front, when I rode up," Billy answered with a shrug. "They had at least three kegs of whiskey. Don't you people know that sellin' fire-water to that bunch is just about as dangerous as slappin' a diamondback's jaws with your bare hand?"

"Get Dirk out here, Tony!" Sam Ricker said, and for the first time the calm was gone from his voice.

Tony Ford straightened up, daubing at his lips with a handkerchief. He looked at Billy Bates in a startled way, then turned, and hurried down the room, still coughing. He went through a door in the partition at the back of the room, and Billy glanced across the bar at Butch Gorgan, who was twisting a bar rag to shreds in his big hands and piling the pieces on the backbar.

"I know you're a rat, Butch, but I never expected to catch you buildin' a nest," Billy said drily.

"The divvil take ye, Billy Bates!" Gorgan roared. "Yuh know it's me foine gun I'm thinkin' of haulin' out o' the dunk barrel to be cleanin!"

"Then think of somethin' else, Butch!" Billy snapped. "Fish that shotgun out of your dunk barrel, and I'll wrap it across your thick skull."

"Glory the day yuh're took down a peg, me cocky rooster!" Gorgan rasped. "Yuh're meddlin' in things that are no concern of yores, Billy Bates."

Billy started to reply, but the words died in his lean throat. The door in the partition across the back of the room had slapped open, and suddenly the post was filled with squeals and giggles and the sharp clatter of small heels. Billy glanced around, his tawny eyes startled as he saw four women rushing him.

"Beat it, you three!" a big, fleshy blonde screeched. "This boy is mine, for I seen him first!"

"Hands off, you gals!" a spindly redhead cried. "This boy belongs to me. Ain't he a darlin'?"

"Go 'way, you cats!" a chunky, brown-

haired girl said. "You three ain't got a chance, with me around."

"Tell these other three to beat it, sugar!" pleaded a tiny little brunette, grinning up at Billy. "Tell 'em that Little Billie is your pick of the flock, and that they're wastin' their time."

"Ladies, please!" Billy said sharply.

SQUEALING and giggling, the women yanked at him all the more, hemming him in against the bar. Billy's mouth tightened, and there was a sudden glint in his tawny eyes. He was a lot more vexed than pleased by the rowdy show the girls were putting on, and was trying to slide out of their clawing reach when he saw a big, rawboned man with black, wavy hair and shiny black eyes step out of the partition doorway, glance towards him, and grin crookedly.

Another man came through the door then, a small, wiry young man in a cavalry lieutenant's uniform. The big, handsome fellow said something to the lieutenant, who stuck his nose up, gave Billy one disgusted glance, then walked briskly towards the front door, the handsome, black-haired man hurrying along beside him. That those two were Dirk Isom and Lieutenant Tom Spee, Billy Bates did not doubt for a second. Nor did he doubt that these four squalling, screeching, clawing females had been set on him by Dirk Isom!

"Neat trick, Ricker!" Billy said harshly, then swung around and walked rapidly down the room.

Billy pulled a quick breath of fresh air into his lungs as he stepped outside, glad to have the acrid fumes of cheap perfume out of his nostrils. Then he was going down the stone steps in lurching strides, his tawny eyes blazing as he saw Lieutenant Spee galloping away. Dirk Isom turned around to face Billy, wide mouth grinning, a mocking something in his jetty eyes.

"What's the matter, sonny?" the handsome man laughed mockingly. "Did Big Sis and those other three ladies frighten you?"

"Dirk Isom?" Billy's voice was low and guttural, a fact that would have warned anyone who knew him to look out for trouble.

But Dirk Isom only grinned mockingly, admitted his identity, and started to brush past Billy.

"You set those gals onto me, then fetched the lieutenant out, so's he'd see me, and think I was startin' out on a rowdy drunk, didn't you, Isom?" Billy asked.

Isom stopped, looked him over from moccasins to dusty beaver hat, then laughed in his face.

"Lieutenant Spee is a very-ah-straight-laced Yankee!" Isom chuckled. "If you went to his camp now, Bates, I doubt if he'd see you. Come along, and we'll—"

Dirk Isom's voice ended on a coarse grunt. Billy Bates had stepped in close, left fist slashing deep into the brawnier man's brocaded vest front. Isom doubled over, handsome face purple with pain and rage. He tried to jerk one of a brace of cap-and-ball pistols he wore, and had the gun half way out of leather when Billy's right fist whammed into Isom's glaring eye. Isom dropped flat.

"Pass me that gun before it gets you into trouble, Isom!" Billy droned.

Dirk Isom had been wallowing around in the dust, cursing, too groggy to obey, so Billy took his guns away from him and tossed them aside. Now Billy had Isom by the scruff, yanking him up to his feet. He saw fury boiling in the black eyes.

The big man got his balance, then charged. Billy threw a light left that stopped Isom's charge, then slammed a vicious right into the big man's left eye. Dirk Isom swapped ends in the air, came down on his stomach, and lay there, moaning feebly but making no effort to rise.

Billy glanced towards the trading post, where the startled Tony Ford, Sam Ricker and Butch Gorgan stood on the porch, watching out of startled eyes. The four painted women were huddled in the doorway, ready to yank their frowzy heads inside at the first hint of danger. Billy gave his hands a dusting motion, walked over to his horse, pulled the repeating Spencer rifle from the scabbard on the saddle, then mounted.

Billy Bates sighed with relief when he slid his horse down a steep bank to the bottom of a gully that meandered along Big Sink. The trading post was shut off from view now, and he slid the Spencer into the saddle boot. He followed the deep gully for a mile, then rode out to the smoother ground above. A half mile ahead of him was the army camp, and Billy was swinging towards it, mouth set grimly, when he saw the

lone rider loping up the sink towards him. Billy slowed his mount, swinging to face the tall rider who waved to him, spurring forward.

"A buckskin man, by grab!" the rider cried as they met. "Feller, am I glad to see yuh!"

LOOKING at him, Billy Bates said nothing. His tawny eyes went over the lean, grizzled man, studying him from dusty boots to sweat-marked gray sombrero in swift glances.

"I'm Harp Willard, young feller!" the grizzled man held out a calloused hand. "Yuh're pretty young, but I'm still hopin' them buckskins yuh're wearin' are the stamp of yore callin' instead of just a boy's notion of somethin' fancy to wear. Yuh ever done any scoutin', son?"

There was eager hopefulness in Harp Willard's voice, and Billy saw that the man was tense, worried, and pretty nervous.

"I'm Billy Bates, Willard," Billy drawled. "I've scouted some, so these buckskins of mine—"

"Billy Bates!" Harp Willard said gleefully. "And me wonderin' if yuh knowed anything about scoutin'!"

Harp Willard wrung Billy's hand until the young scout winced, then rocked back in the saddle, face reddening as he grinned sheepishly.

"Bill Cody and me have been friends a long time, son, and I'm so glad to see yuh, I don't know whether to start singin' with joy, or just bust out bawlin' in relief."

"What seems to be the trouble?" Billy asked.

"Trouble!" Willard groaned. "I've got better'n two thousand head of Texas longhorns spread out on graze, down this sink a couple miles."

"I saw the cattle when I topped the rim of the sink, a while ago," Billy remarked.

"Did yuh come past the settlement, up yonder?" Willard asked sharply.

"I was in the settlement," Billy said calmly. "I met Dirk Isom and his two pards, Tony Ford and Sam Ricker. Their bartender, Butch Gorgan, is a tough rooster I've run into before."

"To blazes with Isom and them other two-legged labos!" Harp Willard said fiercely. "Didn't yuh notice nothin' unusual about that log buildin' they've turned into a tradin' post, Billy?"

"Come to think of it, I took the buildin' to be a big ranchhouse, when I first saw it," Billy declared.

"Tradin' post and saloon!" Harp Willard said. "Billy, did yuh ever hear of Jason Crane's Circle C ranch, down in Texas?"

"Bill Cody and Old Man Crane are good friends, so I've heard quite a lot about the Circle C," Billy replied.

"I've been range boss of the Circle C for a dozen years, son," Harp Willard said slowly. "Them two thousand longhorns down this sink are Circle C cattle, the first of several drives the Old Man ordered brought up here."

"Crane must be loco, buyin' a place this far from civilization!" Billy said sharply. "But howcome this Dirk Isom and his bunch to be turnin' the ranchhouse into a gump-trap, if this place belongs to Jason Crane?"

"I got here a week ago, with this first batch of cattle, son," Harp Willard said with slow emphasis. "Jason Crane had come on ahead of the drive, and said he'd be here to meet me and the boys when we walk-bawled them longhorns onto their new range. I used up a couple of months on the drive, grazin' the cattle along so's they'd be in good shape when we got here."

"Crane wasn't here when you showed up with the cattle?" Billy asked sharply.

"The Old Man wasn't here," Harp Willard said grimly. "This Isom met me, and claims Jason Crane got cold feet, a month back, and pulled out. Isom claims he bought the ranch off Crane, and that the boss left word for me to turn around and head them longhorns back to Texas."

BILLY frowned uneasily. "Well, I don't know. Cattle grazin' over these plains is somethin' that a lot of us have dreamed of seein', Willard. But until we see how General Crook gets through smashin' Indian resistance along the frontier, a venture like this yore boss started will be dangerous, at best."

"With Lost His Ears and a band of Comanches messin' around this neck of the woods, the boss could have decided he was sorta premature with his plans for ranchin' out here," Harp Willard said. "Isom says he'll have the deed to the ranch down from Denver to show me, soon as it can be executed proper. So maybe the boss did get cold feet and

sell this place, even if I don't believe that for nary a second. But when Dirk Isom claims Jason Crane left orders for me to push the cattle back to Texas soil, I know beyond any shadder of doubt that the dirty son is a bald-faced liar!"

"Why are you so sure Crane wouldn't want his cattle taken back to Texas?" Billy asked sharply.

"Son, the carpet-baggers who run Texas make a business of ruinin' men like Jason Crane," Harp Willard growled. "Them carpet-baggers make up their own laws as they go along, demand taxes that no property owner can meet, and have an army of murderin' rascals they call State Police, who may plunge Texas into a state of civil war, the way their kind done in Louisiana.

"Jason Crane bought this ranch up here with cash money them carpet-baggers never dreamed he had. He let on like he was roundin' up his longhorns and shovin' out to market with the critters so's he could raise the money for what them carpet-baggin' sons brazenly call taxes. Jason Crane might tell me and the boys to take our six-shooters and kill them steers, Billy, if he wound up with no place to graze the brutes. But he'd never tell us to take 'em back to the Texas carpet-baggers he hates like sin!"

"So you think there's been dirty work here," Billy said gravely. "You believe Dirk Isom and his two pards, Tony Ford and Sam Ricker, bamboozled Jason Crane out of this ranch somehow, don't you, Willard?"

"They bamboozled or murdered the Old Man, Billy," the Circle C ramrod said hoarsely.

"Have you told Lieutenant Spee this?" the young scout asked.

Harp Willard's weather-beaten face turned stormy, and his worried eyes pinched down to bitter slits.

"That puffed-up young squirt!" he snorted. "Spee is so new to the frontier he squeaks when he moves, Billy. Spee arrived here three days ago, and I was shore tickled to see him and his troops. But did I get a cold shoulder when I tried to talk to that fool kid!"

"Spee wouldn't talk with you?" Billy asked, frowning.

"He not only wouldn't talk to me, but wouldn't let me come inside the camp!" Willard groaned.

"So you let it go at that, eh?" Billy asked.

"I swallowed my pride, watched until I seen Spee ride out of camp towards Isom's saloon, and overtook him," the Texan declared. "I told him what I'm up against, what with the ranch in Dirk Isom's hands and a passel of Comanches hangin' around. Spee admitted that he had orders to come here and protect the 'community,' as he called Dirk Isom's joint, up yonder, but said me and my outfit was trespassin' here far as he is concerned, and suggested that we take our 'cows' and go back to Texas!"

"Dirk Isom asked for protection, and evidently gave the army to understand that you're trespassin' here," Billy said gravely. "Willard, you are in a split stick, at that. But I've got a hunch about Jason Crane, and want a little time to do some snoopin' around."

"What's this hunch yuh've got about Jason Crane?" Harp Willard asked.

"I think Crane is a prisoner, bein' held by Lost His Ears," Billy said quietly. "Dirk Isom is workin' on Jason Crane, torturin' him or havin' the Comanches torture him, wantin' yore boss to deed over this ranch."

"Wh-what's that?" Harp Willard gasped, face paling.

THE young scout's expression was somber.

"I've only got a hunch to go on, remember," Billy warned. "But Dirk Isom did yell to the army for help, claimin' he was afraid of the Comanches that are around here. Isom lied about bein' afraid of those Indians, for they trade at his post, and he's dishin' out whiskey to them. I think you and your Circle C riders are the people Isom actually fears. Isom's promise to show you a properly drawn and executed deed to this place makes me think he's holding your boss somewhere, hoping to bully Jason Crane into signing such a paper."

"Good gosh, Billy, I never thought of it that way!" Willard gulped.

"Keep what I've said between us, Willard," Billy said grimly. "I'm goin' down to see this Lieutenant Spee. If I can talk sense into the man—"

"You'd waste yore breath," Harp Willard cut in sharply. "But any way, son, yuh'll be spared the ride to Spee's camp, for here he comes. That's Sergeant Capper with him, and Capper is a seasoned campaigner who'd handle this mess here the right way, if he had the

authority to do it."

Billy glanced down the sink, tawny eyes lighting as he saw the big, grizzled man riding along behind Lieutenant Tom Spee. The lieutenant was flinging up a hand to signal a halt, raking Billy up and down with chill eyes that were as blue as new ice. Spee's face was round, red-cheeked, and smoothly shaven, and his lips were pulled down into a severe line as he halted his mount.

"Howdy, Ed!" Billy grinned at the big sergeant. "See the savages haven't lifted your hair yet, amigo!"

"Hello, Billy!" the sergeant answered, smiling. "I figured you'd be the man Lieutenant Spee described to me. We'd started out to meet up with—"

"That will do, Sergeant!" Spee bit the words out sharply.

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant said, and looked at the back of the lieutenant's stiff neck.

"You're Bates, of the army scouts?" Spee flung the question at Billy, who turned tawny eyes directly on him for the first time.

"I take orders from Bill Cody, chief of all scouts, Spee," Billy said quietly.

"Lieutenant Spee, if you please!" the officer barked. "And suppose you explain why you took the liberty of engaging in a drunken carouse before reporting to me upon your arrival here, Bates!"

"You don't understand, sir!" Sergeant Capper said hastily. "Bates often works with the army, that's true. But he's a free agent, lookin' only to Mr. Cody for orders, sir!"

"Indeed!" Lieutenant Spee snorted. "And will you please refrain from interrupting again, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant said wearily, and rolled his keen, dark eyes despairingly.

"Now, Bates!" Spee said briskly. "On with your explanations, if you please."

"In the first place, I haven't been mixed up in anything like a carouse," Billy drawled. "Isom set those four gals onto me up there awhile ago, makin' sure he'd have a chance to get you out of there before I had a chance to talk with you. In the second place, it isn't any of your blasted business how I act. And in the third place, I have no intention of reporting to you or any puffed up puppy like you, now or in the future."

"Look here, my man!" Spee gulped. "Don't you realize I might report you for such—such impudence?"

"Speakin' of reports, reminds me that I'm here on a mission," Billy said. "I'll have to make a report, of course. When I make my report, it may include the information that I found you here, aiding and abetting a gigantic swindle that may involve murder. Wipe your nose, Junior, and start thinkin' up answers to the questions you'll hear when your court martial trial comes up."

BILLY perked his head at Harp Willard by way of signaling him to follow, and started riding away. Harp Willard was gaping at him, eyes fairly popping out. Lieutenant Tom Spee was gaping, too, much more surprised than angry, Billy noted. Sergeant Ed Capper looked ready to burst with pent-up laughter, and shook hands with himself by way of thanking Billy for taking some of the wind out of the cocky young officer's sails.

"Man, but did you give that kid a jolt!" Willard laughed when they were well away from Lieutenant Spee and Sergeant Capper.

"Spee isn't a bad sort," Billy chuckled. "He's scared stiff because he realized how blamed green he actually is, and makes a fool of himself by tryin' to hide his fear and uncertainty by a show of pomp and authority."

"Just the same, son, I'd be careful," Harp Willard said gravely. "Spee might try to give yuh trouble for bawlin' him out the way yuh done. Come along to camp, and meet the boys."

"I want to take a little pasear out over the ridges right now, Willard," Billy said. "But get your men bunched, have plenty of powder and lead handy, and stand by for trouble."

Billy wheeled his horse as he talked, loped away before Harp Willard could protest or start asking questions. He swung north, and within a half hour he had found the sign left by Crying Owl and the other Comanches who had left Isom's trading post with three kegs of whiskey.

But Billy Bates was too wise in the ways of Indians to light out along the plain sign that bunch had left. He followed the marks of travois and unshod hoofs long enough to know the general direction taken by the Comanches, then angled off north and west as if uninter-

ested, aware that beady eyes might be watching him, even then.

Billy kept off the skyline as much as possible, and worked steadily north and west until he was in the cedar brakes along a chain of foothills that marched off to dim, blue mountains in the west. He swung south once he was in the rougher, timbered country, and the sun was dipping low towards the ragged peaks on his right when he located the Comanche camp in a deep, bowl-like depression at the base of the hills.

Shadows were already pooling in the lowlands, and Billy hurried all he dared as he crept down the slope to a bluff directly above the Indian camp. And after one look down into the bowl-like depression, his tawny eyes were sharp with growing uneasiness. Cooking fires were going, dogs and squaws and children swarmed everywhere, and Billy saw the bucks down at the center of the depression, where a spring flowed out of the ground. The bucks were squatting on their haunches, listening to a big, brutal looking savage who talked and gestured excitedly.

"Lost His Ears!" Billy muttered, watching the speaker.

The distance was too great for Billy to see the disfigurement that had won that savage the name, Lost His Ears. But when the Indian had been a gangly young buck, and eager to prove his prowess as a warrior, he had led a band of other fiery young Comanches up into the Piute country, intending to steal horses and lift a few scalps. But the Piutes bottled the Comanches up in a canyon, tomahawked and scalped all but the leader, whose ears were sliced off in punishment for his audacity in leading the bold raid. From that time on, the big, ugly savage had been called Lost His Ears.

"Too bad the Piutes didn't cut his cussed throat instead of just whackin' off his big ears," Billy Bates muttered now.

Billy judged that there were close to two hundred of the bucks down at the spring, and knew that there were probably more of them somewhere, possibly out on scouting expeditions. There were a lot more of the Indians than Billy had hoped there would be, and he was scowling uneasily as he studied the rows of tepees pitched along the center of the basin. He had planned on sneaking into the Indian camp under the cover of darkness, feeling confident that old Jason Crane was a prisoner here in the Comanche camp.

"There's a chance, of course, that Dirk Isom and his bunch are holdin' Crane somewhere in Big Sink," the young scout muttered aloud. "But I doubt that. In the first place, it would be too risky, with Crane's Circle C cowhands hangin' around. In the second place, Dirk Isom handin' out whisky and playin' along with Lost His Ears after tellin' the army that he's afraid of the Indians, sure proves that he's cooked up some kind of a deal with these war-whoops."

SLOWLY Billy's tawny eyes roved along the bluff where he lay hidden until he located a deep notch in the rim that marked the head of a gully that scarred the slope all the way down to the basin floor. That gully, Billy decided, was made to order, for it would give him a way into the basin that afforded good cover all the way. He waited patiently until the sun had set, and the purple shadows of dusk thickened to darkness. He moved to the gully head then and started down, hands instinctively touching the wicked scalping knife on the left side of his belt, and the smooth grips of the Dragoon Colt that was slung at his right thigh.

Billy Bates searched the first groups of tepees, then moved on to the second. He worked swiftly yet silently, his every sense alert with the knowledge that danger was at his elbow at every second, and that death would certainly be the penalty if he was caught prowling the Comanche camp. He moved in on the last bunch of tepees that were close enough to the cooking fires to be touched by the flickering light, and had ghosted silently in and out of a dozen of them when he heard the man swearing peevishly.

The sounds came from the tepee off to Billy's left, and from the size of it he knew that he had at last located the lodge of Lost His Ears. The young scout went forward with the silence of a drifting shadow, circling until he was behind the big tepee. He flattened out along the ground, grasped the skins that were stretched over tall poles to form the tepee, and raised the back edge cautiously.

"Do whatever yuh're up to, yuh cussed savage, and get it over with!" an angry voice growled. "What'll it be this time,

more thorns shoved into these swelled-up feet of mine? Is Dirk Isom and his bunch here too?"

"Sh-hh!" Billy hissed. "You Jason Crane?"

"Yuh're no cussed Injun!" the deep voice gasped. "Whoever yuh are, get me loose from—"

"Quiet, man, or you'll have the whole camp up here!" Billy gritted. "You're Crane?"

The young scout had holstered his Dragoon and was pulling the wicked knife from scabbard as he slid forward. He saw the dim movements of the man then, and heard an odd sort of choked sound as he reached the prisoner's side.

"I'm Jason Crane," came the tense whisper.

"Quiet!" Billy hissed, his hands feeling swiftly until he found the bonds that held the man lashed to a six-foot length of thick log.

Billy's voice was a guttural growl in his throat as he sliced the rawhide bonds that held Jason Crane to that log. He had seen prisoners treated that way before, and knew that the Comanche's idea of something very amusing was to take a man lashed to such a log and roll him down a long slope, shouting their delight as the weight of the log battered their luckless victim to bloody pulp.

"There!" Billy panted. "Can you travel, Mr. Crane?"

"There are thorns in my feet, and some of 'em have been there over a week," Jason Crane said grimly. "But I'll use them swollen-up feet to get me out of here, man."

"Follow me!" Billy hissed, and crawled to the back of the tepee.

Jason Crane slid out into the night, lifting up to stand beside Billy. He was a big man, and the young scout smothered a groan of dismay when he saw the ranchman sway.

"No arguments, now!" Billy hissed. "And don't make this tougher for me by strugglin'. Up you go!"

Billy picked Crane up, slung him, face down, over one shoulder, and started off through the tepees, walking rapidly. Jason Crane gulped in surprise, but had the good sense to let his body remain lax.

"Yuh're as strong as a hoss, whoever yuh are," the Texan whispered.

Billy made no effort to reply. He was fading away among the tepees, his breath coming fast by the time he reached the slope. He was on the point of stopping for a brief rest before tackling the slope when a high, wailing voice lifted behind him.

"Them squaws who feed me have found out I'm gone!" Jason Crane gasped.

BILLY went up the slope in long, steady strides, his powerful back and shoulders aching from strain, the breath whistling from his open mouth in painful gasps. But behind him the whole Comanche camp was a howling bedlam now, and the young scout went on up the slope to the ravine he had followed down, then along that to the rimrock. He was staggering, all but exhausted when he finally reached his horse, boosted Jason Crane into the saddle, and crawled up behind him.

"We'll make it now, Mr. Crane," Billy panted. "Guide the hoss, but hold him down to a walk until we're north of this sink, then swing east. I want to get back to that ranchhouse of yores before Dirk Isom and his bunch find out yuh're no longer a prisoner in the Comanche camp."

Billy Bates made no attempt to arrive unnoticed at the ranchhouse which Dirk Isom and his friends had turned into a frontier honky-tonk. He went up the steps and into the lamplight, his moccasins making so little sound, his arrival went unnoticed until he was inside the trading post, walking towards the bar.

Dirk Isom, Tony Ford and Sam Ricker were at the far end of the bar, listening to Butch Gorgan, who was pounding the bar with a hairy fist.

"And it's a bad omen, I tell yuh, gintlemen!" Butch was saying. "Here we've got thim farmers from up the sink, plus a batch of troopers, too, in here a-spendin' their money, free and easy, when along comes this Sargint Capper, a-whisperin' to the troopers. Next thing we know them troopers and the farmers is gone, and—"

"Bates!" Tony Ford said in a sharp voice.

Dirk Isom and Sam Ricker swung around, and Billy saw that Isom's glittering eyes were ringed with puffy, reddened flesh.

"Get out from behind that bar, Butch, so's I can see what you're doin'," Billy said coldly.

"I've got no weepon, Billy Bates!" the bald tough growled. "Whin I hauled me foine shotgun out of the dunk barrel, it was so rusted I had to throw it away."

"You're a poor liar, Butch," Billy snorted. "A gun can't rust under water that quick."

"Here, now!" Dirk Isom called loudly. "Bates, I don't blame yuh for bein' a little edgy, the way you were treated here this afternoon. But that's all past, and there'll be no more trouble unless you make it. Butch, set out bottles and glasses."

"I'm tellin' you for the last time, Gorgan, to step out from behind that bar!" Billy said flatly.

"What do yuh mean, comin' in here givin' orders, Bates?" Dirk Isom asked hotly.

"I'm turnin' you four over to the authorities!" Billy said grimly.

Butch Gorgan croaked an oath, crouched behind the bar until only his shiny dome and evil, hate-filled eyes showed above gleaming cherrywood.

"What charges do you think you could make against us, Bates?" Sam Ricker asked in his gentle voice.

"The kind of charges that'll get you strung up by any frontier jury that hears them!" Billy snapped. "I just brought Jason Crane in from the Comanche camp, where you four rotten devils have had the old man held prisoner. You've tortured Crane yourselves, and you've had the Comanches torture him, tryin' to make him deed this ranch over to you. White men who'd do a thing like that—"

Billy's voice broke off. Butch Gorgan had roared out an oath, and his sawed-off shotgun was nosing over the bar top, both hammers eared back above the shiny brass caps. Billy's right hand blurred down, and suddenly the room was filled with the blending roar of the shotgun and the scout's Dragoon.

But the Dragoon's hoarse thunder had come a second before the bellowing roar of the shotgun's double explosion. Butch Gorgan was falling backwards as he yanked triggers, the barrels of his gun went slanting ceilingwards. There was a round, black hole high in Gorgan's forehead where Billy's slug had struck, and a jagged, blood-spurting rent in the back of his skull where the slug had come out.

A BULLET knocked the beaver hat off Billy's head, and a second ripped his left cheek open, sending blood down his face to splash the front of his buckskin garments. Dirk Isom and Tony Ford were hunkered behind the end of the bar, slanting their pistols over the polished wood and pumping shots rapidly at him.

Billy blasted a shot at Tony Ford when Isom ducked out of sight, and saw Ford leap up and backwards, heard his eerie screams as he dropped his gun and clamped shaking hands to a round hole beside his nose that was spouting a spray of blood. Tony Ford's screams became a gurgling rattle as he staggered two feeble steps backwards, then fell.

A slug hit Billy slantingly across the left ribs, knocking him away from the bar. He saw Sam Ricker behind the overturned card table, resting his gun on the table's edge for another shot. Billy's Dragoon bucked in his hand, but even as he fired a slug from Dirk Isom's gun ripped through his left thigh, throwing him sidewise. He missed Sam Ricker, and missed a snap shot at Dirk Isom as he staggered from the impact of Isom's bullet. And Billy Bates realized suddenly that he was in something worse than a bad spot, for there were two dangerous men gunning for him there in the powder-fogged room, and he had but one cartridge left in his Dragoon!

"So ends the career of Buffalo Billy Bates, boy wonder of the frontier scouts!" Sam Ricker called mockingly. "I think you have only one live load left in that Colt, Bates. Can you make the one charge account for Dirk and me both, bucko?"

"By glory, Sam, if you're right about that long-haired young devil havin' but one charge left in his gun, then we've got him cold!" Dirk Isom said harshly.

Isom was staying down behind the bar's north end, and Sam Ricker was out of sight behind the thick-topped table he had overturned to use as a shield. Billy Bates thought desperately of trying to reload his weapon, but knew that he dared not risk it, for at any second one or both of the gunmen might bob up, shooting at him. He heard Dirk Isom move stealthily, and tried to shift in closer to the bar. But his bullet numbed left leg buckled the moment he put all his weight on it, and he fell forward.

"Now, Dirk!" Sam Ricker yelled.

Billy landed on his knees, pitched on forward until his left hand was flat

against the floor. Sam Ricker came up from behind the table like a jack-in-the-box, his moon face grinning coldly, the pistol in his hand whipping down. Almost desperately Billy's sinewy right wrist tensed, slanting the muzzle of the big Dragoon upwards. The two pistols blazed almost in unison, and Billy felt the fiery touch of a bullet raking his scalp clean across the top of his head.

But Sam Ricker would fire no other shot. He coughed loudly, took a blind stride forward, and fell draped across the table that had protected him, blood spilling from his sagging mouth in a red spray.

Billy Bates pitched suddenly forward, flinging his tall body completely around as he plastered himself against the floor. A gun roared, and when he came around he saw Dirk Isom running at him along the front of the bar. Billy had heard the scrape of Isom's boots and ducked in time to save himself. Isom, he realized now, had crept along behind the bar to the south end, then had come out while he was swapping shots with Sam Ricker.

"Got you!" Isom roared, and his pistols leveled as he halted on wide planted feet.

Billy Bates swept his right arm forward with all the power he had, letting the big Dragoon go whirling towards Dirk Isom's face. Isom's pistols roared, and Billy felt splinters burn his face, the twin slugs came so close. But the whirling Dragoon had scraped across the side of Dirk Isom's face, slamming him against the bar. He dropped the smoking pistol from his left hand, clutched the bar to keep from falling.

BILLY BATES arched his body up, dived from a kneeling position. He got his arms around Isom's powerful legs, and succeeded in wrenching the man down in a crashing fall. But Isom kicked him in the face with a heavy boot, and was sitting in his middle before Billy knew what was happening. He saw Dirk Isom's savage grin, and saw the gun Isom still had slanted down towards his face.

Desperately, Billy's clawing hands found Dirk Isom's wrist, wrenching his gun-filled hand back and up. Isom cursed loudly, whammed his left fist into Billy's face. Billy's senses reeled, but he hung on. Isom reared up, drove a knee into Billy's middle, and the young scout's senses tottered on the brink of oblivion while pain went through him in sickening waves. He felt Isom's wrist start lowering despite his efforts to hang on, and knew that he had but one slim hope of saving his life.

Billy let go of Isom's wrist with his right hand, sent the freed hand reaching down and across his own body. Through a red haze of pain he could see Isom's face, bloated and grinning and triumphant. Billy could see the muzzle of Isom's gun now, tilting slowly down. The shock-numbed fingers of Billy's right hand found the hilt of his wicked knife, tugged it free.

"Now, blast your meddlin' heart!" Isom whooped, and the gun in his big fist roared.

Billy Bates had flung his head sidewise when the pistol's black bore was centered. He shut his eyes tightly, and felt the searing pain of the powder across his face and neck. He felt, too, the solid shock of the knife he had driven upward, going home to the hilt.

Billy opened his eyes and looked up at Dirk Isom, swaying there above him. Isom's face was drained of color, sticky with sweat beads. His eyes bulged, and his tongue protruded. He gagged, and with a thrust of the still imbedded knife, Billy flung the dying hulk of Dirk Isom over sidewise.

Billy was on his knees beside Dirk Isom, the blood-dripping knife still clutched in his hand, when Harp Willard and a dozen of Jason Crane's Circle C cowhands poured into the room.

"Billy, stop that!" Harp Willard yelled.

Billy glanced up, the battle fire dying in his tawny eyes as he watched Willard's seamed face work convulsively.

"Folks was tellin' me that yuh sometimes want to lift an enemy's scalp, son," the Circle C foreman said nervously.

Billy groaned under his breath, realizing what had happened. He had been reaching out, intending to wipe the blade of his knife on Dirk Isom's shoulder. But Harp Willard and those cowhands had come inside just in time to see him, and thought he had meant to gather himself a scalp. And would Bill Cody lay down the law if he got a batch of such mis-information!

"Harp, I sho' hope us Circle C fellas don't evah have us a squabble with this

heah buckskin buckaroo," a lanky Texas cowboy drawled, looking around at the four sprawled bodies.

"Miss, you and the otheh ladies jus' stay back heah until we get things tidied up a mite out front," Billy heard another Texan saying at the back of the room.

BILLY wiped his knife where he had meant to, pushed it into the scabbard on his belt, then stood up, limping down the room to retrieve his Dragoon, which he promptly reloaded and holstered.

"Son, there's somethin' stirrin'!" Harp Willard burst out. "Lieutenant Spee took his troops, or most of 'em, anyhow, and headed west like he was after Old Nick, himself."

"Lieutenant Spee went after Lost His Ears," Billy said quietly. "I doubt if there will be a scrap, for I rescued Jason Crane from the Comanche camp a while ago, and those war whoops would be mighty apt to take to their heels, knowin' the soldiers would come huntin' them."

"Yuh found the Old Man?" Harp Willard shouted. "He's alive, son?"

"I took Jason Crane up to the army camp, and let him tell his own story while the army doc cut thorns out of his feet," Billy said evenly. "Jason Crane has stood a lot of torture at the hands of the Comanches and these four renegade whites. But the army sawbones says Crane will be all right."

For a moment or two the cattleman stared at Bates.

"But why in blazes didn't yuh fetch the Old Man to our camp?" Harp Willard asked sharply.

"I didn't want you Texicans barrelin' up here to this place and startin' a fight with Dirk Isom and his bunch," Billy said simply.

"He didn't want *us* startin' a fight!" a lanky cowhand laughed grimly as he glanced around the room.

The tension was easing, and the Texas cowhands were beginning to relax as they got the four dead men moved to a back corner of the room and covered with a tarp they had found in trade goods. Billy Bates waited until no one was watching him, then limped out the door and to his horse. He mounted to the saddle and rode south, heading towards the army camp. His wounds were paining him quite a lot, and he decided that he would have to have the army doctor patch him up.

"And soon as the doc finishes with me, I'd better light out after Spee and his troops," Billy muttered. "Bill Cody would skin me alive, if I let a green hand like Lieutenant Tom Spee mess around and get outsmarted by that ornery Lost His Ears. Rattle your hocks, pony, for we've still got work to do."

The Six-shooter

THE cowboy's six-shooter was meant primarily for protection and this was most important on the Border, in Indian country, or where there might be outlaws. The gun was also intended for rattlesnakes, wild bulls, or for killing diseased or injured cattle.

One of its biggest uses was simply as a noise-maker, for the cowboy was usually young and exuberant and when he wanted to let off steam and make a lot of noise what better instrument could he have than ol' Betsy, loaded and ready to hand?

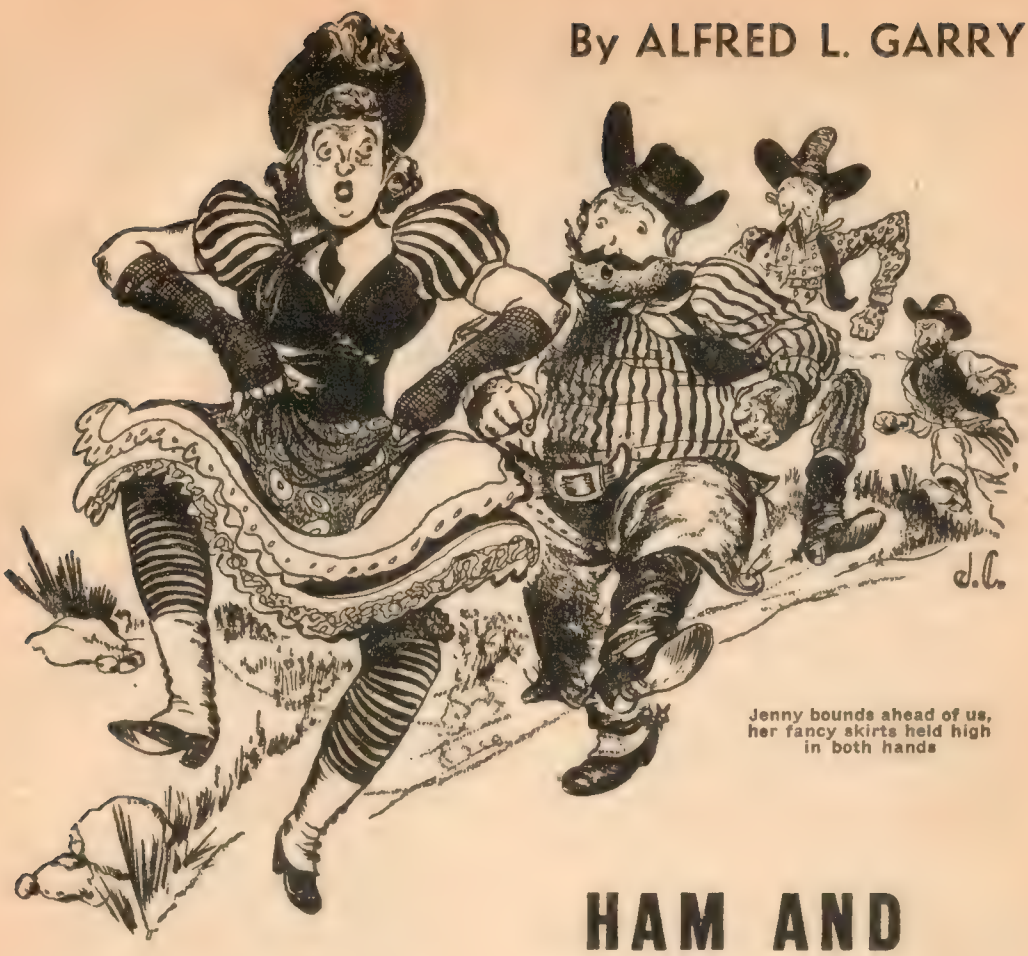
One thing the cowboy learned early was never to bluff with a six-gun, that if he drew it he was to use it. For merely to make a pretense of drawing was to invite the undertaker, since the other man was certainly going to shoot.

The average puncher did not notch his gun butt because the average puncher had no killings to record. Still the ordinary cowboy learned to shoot well and fast with his weapon—few of them would miss a target at a hundred feet.

Although a rifle is more accurate than a hand gun, the cowboy was a better shot with the pistol within its effective range because he was more interested in it and used it more.

—*Cole Weymouth.*

By ALFRED L. GARRY



Jenny bounds ahead of us, her fancy skirts held high in both hands

HAM AND Fluffy Ruffles

MY DEPUTY'S head ain't screwed on very tight so far as female women are concerned. Ham's moping around our office, his face as doleful as a rancher with fourteen mortgages due the day his cattle come down with anthrax. He tugs at his droopy mustache, sighs like a overburdened pack mule, and jerks his thick thumb out the window.

"Ain't that plumb disgustin', Egg," he snorts. "With all the hoot owlin' that's goin' on, there's Sheriff Rawson galavantin' around a woman!"

"So now the kettle is calling the pot black!" I jibe, making the most of the opening. "You, too, had better pay more attention to rodding the law and less to that gay feathered Jenny. If we don't jug that pearl-handled outlaw and his

The Pearl-handled Gang has the lawmen of Sweetgrass County hoppin', jumpin' and skippin' until Egg gets a six-gun notion!

gang, the voters are going to make sheepherders out of us."

"Humph!" Ham grunts, with an overtone of envy, and paying me no mind at all. "Look at Rawson's duds! Yuh'd think it was the Fourth of July."

I clump to the doorway. There's Sheriff Rawson, of neighboring Buckstrap County, tossing sacks of grain into a buckboard for Jenny Humphry. Folks, that lanky, conniving, no-account badge-toter could give a peacock lessons in gaudy colors. Every waddy is vain as sin, but even Rawson's showy gear can't hold a candle to the gay and stylish clothes Jenny Humphry sports.

"Oh, Sheriff," Miss Jenny gushes as Rawson lifts around the grain sacks like they don't weigh nothing, "I don't know what I'd do without you big strong men to help out poor little me."

Now, that "little me" is strictly one of them figgers of speech. If Jenny, with all her fluffy ruffles is little, then Goat Mountain is a mole hill. She's tall, brawny as a blacksmith, and has the blocky face of a Hereford that'd darn near paralyze an eight day clock. But she's a woman, and dresses plumb gorgeous in peek-a-boo waists, lace bustles, and wide picture hats. In these parts of Montaner, anything that wears skirts is as rare as soap in a sheep camp, so the hairpins fall all over themselves trying to date her up.

"Rawson," Ham clips like a bossy foreman, "Mind how yuh're handlin' them grain sacks. Yuh're tossin' 'em a might too forceful. If yuh bust a bag, pore Miss Jenny'll lose some grain."

"So now yuh think yuh can learn me how to load grain?" Rawson sneers. "Why, yuh fat sawed-off runt, yuh're too puny to hoist a dime sack of salt into this buckboard!"

"Listen, yuh slack-jointed unprincipled, beanpole," Ham says insultingly, "I could pick up a sack of grain with one hand and lick yuh with the other!"

JUST to show his muscle, Ham picks up a hundred-pound sack of feed and lays it in the buckboard as gentle as a nester's wife setting down a dozen eggs.

"But how about lickin' me with the other hand?" Rawson jeers, right spleeny. "Yuh run off at the mouth powerful brave, Ham. Just put up them dukes!"

Rawson's fists commence to saw the air as he advances toward Ham. Ham takes a pose like that picture of John L. in Freddie's Bar. I grin. Ham'll need a step ladder to reach Rawson's chin. He's due for a pasting, which I'm glad he's going to get. It may bring him back to his senses.

Rawson winds up like a baseball pitcher, and lets fly a haymaker at Ham's head. Ham ducks under, and pistons his right for Rawson's wishbone. It lands on his star, skinning Ham's knuckles.

"Listen, you two banty cocks, cut it out!" Jenny forces her way between the two men, solid as the Rock of Gibraltar. She holds them apart by hands full of vest. "Bury the hatchet! Here, Ham, you load the barley. Rawson, load the corn."

As she says that, she shakes them until their teeth rattle. Both men are still struggling to get at each other when a horseman lathers into town, quirting his tired mount. He spies Rawson, reins over, and dismounts pony express. Trouble! It's Rawson's deputy, Walt Smythe.

"Sheriff, Sheriff," he pants hoarsely, "The Buckstrap Bank! Robbed! The High Lode Mine has been cleaned out by hootowls packing pearl handled guns," he finishes significantly.

"Any robbers killed?"

There's sort of a catch in Jenny's voice.

"Nope." Walt shakes his head. He whirls on Rawson, "Two citizens wounded. Talk's runnin' high! You'd better get back and tend to business, Rawson."

"Yeah!" Ham chimes in. "Beat it, Rawson, or them Buckstrappers will tack yore hide on an out—aw, I mean, barn door."

Ham turns to Jenny, as he finishes virtuously, "Ain't it a shame, ma'am, how some public servants neglect their sworn duty."

"We'll finish this later!" Rawson growls blackly.

He mounts up, raising his quirt.

"Want any help?" I offer.

"Yeah, fifty-fifty on any reward!" Ham's commercial mind works fast.

"Not by a jugful!" Rawson lays on his quirt, dusting out of town.

"That pearl handled gang again!" Ham ejaculates, frowning, "Them hootowls seem to have a genius for being where no lawman ain't."

Ham's right. Our stock is at an all-time low with the voters. If we are at one end of the county, this masked gang with the fancy cutters, shows up at the other end, running off a beef herd, robbing a bank, or helping themselves to a mine clean-up, slick as a whistle.

We bait all kinds of traps for Mr. Pearl Handles and his gang. We let it be known around that a certain bank is going to have a heap of cash to pay-off on beef shipments, and at the same time we let it be known that we got law business in the far end of the county. We double back, and lay in wait at the bank with a couple of sawed-off shotguns. Two of which will take four of a kind of pearl handles any day.

But this gang's smart leader, who we call Mr. Pearl Handles, don't fall for nothing like that! No sir! He just makes us look like a pair of simpletons. Him and his gang, raid the town we're supposed to be at, making a fair sized unmolested haul. He just out-foxes us plenty at every turn.

"Come on," I say to Ham as Rawson's hoof dust commences to settle. "Let's sashay out into the badlands. We may cut this hootowl's trail."

"Just a minute, boys!" Jenny's voice has a sort of helpless compelling whine to it. "Ain't you going to finish loading these grain sacks for poor little me?"

"Shore, shore!" Ham says, right gallantly.

But my deputy certainly gets powerful weak all of a sudden, because he goes on, "Here, Egg, grab ahold. We'll toss 'em on together."

"Thanks, fellows." Jenny screws her face up into what is supposed to be a charming smile. "Which way are you heading? If you should chance to work around toward my spread, drop in and I'll cook a bait of grub."

"And now what chore do you need done?" I ask under my breath.

HAM just beams. "Shore, Jenny. Any hootowls with an ounce of sense would make for the upper Milk River country after raiding Buckstrap. So we aim to cut up the North Fork of the Milk, across Pine Flats, and down Squaw creek. We should wind up at yore place tomorrow—" Ham licks his chops— "in time for supper."

"Good!" Jenny beams, picking up the reins and clucking her team into motion. "Good! I'll be looking for you!"

Me and Ham are leaving town when I happen to glance over my shoulder. Two small clouds are floating in the sky where no clouds should be. Even as I look a third cloud floats lazily up from behind the hills.

"Ham!" I jerk my thumb toward the tiny clouds. "If I didn't know there were no hostiles around, I'd say them clouds was a smoke signal!"

"Could be." Ham squints for a moment. "Darned queer!" Then he shrugs. "But most likely them clouds are caused by a damp gap wind off the Bear Paw Mountain snowfields hittin' the hill and shootin' up into the cold air."

As me and Ham make our camp in a cave and warm our bacon and beans, Ham moons, "Camp grub is all right, but I'm shore lookin' forward to the vittles Jenny'll set before us tomorrow night!"

"Yep!" I cracks. "But I'll bet this Jenny will discover herself suddenly short-handed. There'll be some little job of work to be done. Pard, you shore let yourself get roped into a heap of work for a few measly baits of grub. Get next to yourself. For all her fine clothes and fluffy ruffles, Miss Jenny is a moocher!"

This modish Jenny has worked us right from the start. Some months back, me and Ham hear someone has bought the Wobbly S spread, and rein over that way. We introduce ourselves to Jenny, and ask if her husband is around.

"You boys didn't hear me right." She drops her eyes coyly and gives her frizzed-up hair-do a pat. "I said I was *Miss* Humphry!"

"What, a young gal like yuh ranchin' all alone in this great uncouth section of Montaner!" Ham expands, sweeping off his hat and bowing low. "Lady, I take off my hat to you!"

Hold your hosses, pardner, I think. Somethin' tells me this dame swings a long catch-rope.

"Yep." Jenny nods, a frown gulching her forehead. She goes on in a mooching whine that has become so familiar, "It is so, so hard for me to get along. I don't know what I'd do if it wasn't for my foreman, Ferdinand Gomez. I'll call him."

This Gomez, I don't cotton to right from the start. He's a runty Californian, with a high peaked sombrero, leather vest with frogs and gold piece buttons, and tight-fitting bell bottom pants. His

beady black eyes fasten on our badges as he shakes hands limply.

"Senors will excuse," he mumbles. "Work. Cattle. Be gone two, maybe three days."

He collects three other hands and racks off. Like all them California vaqueros, their basket stamped gear is gaudy with silver conchas, and they pack the long braided rawhide reatas of the south. The working gear of these buckaroos is more magnificent than any Montaner cowhand's best rodeo scenery. I just can't see 'em working cattle in that fancy gear.

"I'm powerfully short-handed!" Jenny gets that pleading whine in her voice as the men ride off. "Do you know that I've never been able to search out the location stakes of my spread! Would either of you gentlemen happen to know where the boundaries are?"

"Shore, shore!" Ham leaps like a hungry trout at the chance to ace himself in with her. "Me and Egg know every darned section marker in Sweetgrass County. Trot out yore deed. We'll show yuh."

"I'll run and change my clothes," Jenny says gleefully.

Well sir, when she comes out the door I darned near fall off my bronc. I'd sort of expected her to change into levis and shirt, like the rest of the ranch women wear when they mount up. But not our stylish Jenny.

She's wearing a hard derby hat and a tailored riding habit. And when she mounts up, it is side saddle! But I'll say this for her. She can ride. It takes us two days of hard going to find the corners, and not once do we have to pull up and wait for her.

JENNY puts us up at the bunkhouse, and feeds us. She's no great shucks as a cook, what with dishing up chili-hot California vittles. But after eating bachelor crooked grub all our lives, anything we don't fry tastes like Delmonico's to us.

On the last day when we are scouting for the southeast corner, Jenny spies a fine spring.

"I hope that water is on my property," she says, and again I can detect that gimme-gimme whine. "With that spring, I'd be able to throw an extra hundred head in this area."

Ham finds the iron corner stake, and taking out his compass, squints along the line.

"Gosh, Miss Jenny," he tells her. "Yore line is just about a hundred feet outside that spring. It belongs to yore neighbor, Sam Beck."

"Do you suppose Sam Beck knows where this marker is?" she asks.

"Heck, no," Ham tells her. "Out here in Montaner most ranchers don't bother to survey their range."

"I'm just a girl all alone, and I do so need that water!" she snivels. "You boys won't squeal, will you!"

With that, Jenny dismounts, wrestles the Government survey stake out of the ground, and moves it so that the spring is inside of her line.

As we are mogging back to Sweetgrass in the twilight, Ham looks wistfully back at Jenny's ranch house.

"That gal must be a worker!" he exclaims. "Look, since we left, she has done a washing!"

Shore enough, a couple of white sheets are hanging on her clothes line.

Sweetgrass is seething like a tromped on ant hill when we get back. The blistering tongue lashing we get burns our ears worse than Jenny's tabasco cooking burned our tongues.

"Where you two old mosshorns been?" Banker Williams demands, hot under the collar as Old Faithful. "You loafers!"

"Walk yore hosses, friend." Ham looks worried. "What's happened?"

"Nothing much!" Banker Williams is sarcastic. "A group of gentlemen, led by a chap with pearl handled forty-fives, just walked into my bank and withdrew five thousand dollars. They seemed to be in a hurry, and forgot to sign a note." Williams glares at us.

The trail is too cold, so me and Ham try to euchre our way out of the doghouse by asking a lot of questions. Pearl Handles and his hootowls, some said three, others four, drift into town from different directions. They go to work like a well-trained team. One makes for the hitching-racks, jerking the knots of the standing broncs so slyly that no one knows what's happening. Pearl Handles and another hombre stroll toward the bank. Just as they reach the front door, a hootowl at the opposite end of our main and only street, lets go with his cutters, war whooping and yelping like a drunken Comanche. Naturally all the folks are attracted in that direction.

Mr. Pearl Handles and his pal just slouch into the bank, stick up Williams and his penpushers, stuff the paper money from the open vault into grain sacks, walk out, and mount up.

The feller who has unknotted the broncs at the hitching racks, charges among the loosened hosses, laying his quirt left and right. The spooked broncs scatter like quail, leaving the gape-mouthed townsfolk on foot as the bandits rack out of town with their easy gotten loot. It's all planned and carried out as slick as a buffalo calf's nose. The fleeing hootowls are far out of range before anyone knows just what has happened.

Naturally, Rawson gives us the haw-haw. But now that his Buckstrap has been visited by Mr. Pearl Handles, he's laughing out of the other side of his onery face. Just like in our case, the voters are roweling him unmerciful because he was out of his bailiwick when Mr. Pearl Handles rustled the mine clean-up.

The Miners' Association tosses a few more blue chips on top of the banker's reward offer.

Ham eyes the tilted reward notice greedily. "Egg, I could use some extra dinero. Let's collect this pearl handled gent!"

THROWING our gear on a packhorse, me and Ham commence prowling the mountains and dry canyons, hoping to cut some sign of the bandits. All the time, Ham keeps edging south, toward the Wobbly S range. I ain't fooled none. He's panging for a tête-a-tête about love and such with Miss Jenny.

"Egg," Ham cuss-mumbles one morning as he's getting breakfast, "what'n tarnation did yuh do with the salt?"

"I set it on that flat rock by the spring last night," I reply.

"Find it!" he challenges.

Well, sir, me and Ham look high and low around our campsite. But we can't find our salt. It's vanished like a five-dollar bill in a crooked crap game. Yet I know for certain I left it on that rock.

Ham frowns. "Got to have salt." Then his face brightens as though the bright idear just struck him. "I know what!"

"What?" I want to know, sniffing at the powerful odor of rat.

"We're only a half day's ride from Miss Jenny's," Ham goes on with a poker face. "Yuh cut around the base of this foothill for sign of Mr. Pearl Handles, and I'll ride over to Jenny's to borrow some salt."

"Oh, no, you don't!"

I tromp on his idear with both feet. I'm darned shore Ham's ditched our salt just for the excuse to visit Jenny.

"You'll find mooching Jenny will have some littly-bitsy job of work to do," I continue, mocking him. "I'll be out here without salt until kingdom come. I'm going with you."

Ham's face falls like a bride's cake.

"Three's a crowd," he mumbles pointedly.

"Yep," I agree airily, "but two heads are better than one in getting out of work!"

As we mog over the hill, we see a dun ground-tied in front of Jenny's ranch-house. Ham pulls up, fumbling out his range glasses. He focuses on the mount.

"The low-lived no-account shirker!" Ham explodes thunderously. "The darned back-stabber! Instead of attending to his sworn duty, the onery polecat is tryin' to beat my time with Miss Jenny!"

"Who?"

"Rawson!" Ham bites off his words furiously as he rakes his bronc. "I'm goin' to a-bait that nuisance."

As we pound into the ranch yard, Rawson, followed by Jenny, comes to the door. He's goose quilling his teeth elegant behind his hand. Until he recognizes us, his face has the well-fed contented look of a jackass what's busted into a corn crib. Then his lantern-jawed face clouds up like a rain squall over Goat Mountain.

"Rawson, yuh slacker!" Ham don't parley around none, but lets go both barrels. "While us lawmen are doin' our duty, camping out on the cold hard ground, eating beans and bacon, and cutting for sign of that pearl handled bandit from dawn to dark, yuh are dawdlin' here!"

"What's it to you?" Rawson is as belligerent as a cornered wolverine. "You ain't payin' my wages."

"I'll see that them as do are told of yore shirkin'," Ham threatens. Then he adds smooth as goose grease, "That is, unless yuh pull yore freight quick and sudden."

"I'll quick and sudden knock yore block off!"

Head down, and arms flailing like a windmill, Rawson charges. But Jenny moves nimble as a hippy-pot-a-muss, throwing her bulk between the warriors.

She pats Ham's cheek playful, cooing, "Hamilton, I do believe you are jealous. Sheriff Rawson was just explaining to me that when he was a boy back on the farm, he was a champion post hole digger."

"That stringy muscled weaklin' could not dig a pit out of a cherry pie," Ham retorts, very nasty.

"I can throw enough dirt to bury yore stinkin' carcass any day!" Rawson bellows, red-faced. "And the first step'll be knockin' yuh stiff!"

RAWSON dodges around Jenny, swarming over Ham like a catamount. For a minute they trade lusty fists. But Jenny moves in, quickly breaking up the melee.

"Shame on you!" she scolds. "Fighting is no way to settle an argument like that."

"Yep!" Ham agrees. "Knockin' Rawson's block off wouldn't do any good. The dim-wit would never miss it."

"I know what," Jenny exclaims, going on as though she ain't laid the groundwork as cleverly as any Apache ambush. "Gomez and the hands are away picking up some two-year-olds I'm going to fatten for the Butte market. We intended to build a wire corral. See that pile of posts over there? Well, why don't you men see who can dig the most post holes instead of fighting?"

Jenny rolls her eyes like Naughty Marietta, and finishes as coy as a kitten, "I just adore big strong men who can do practical things."

Well, sir, them two proddy roosters fall for her beguiling wiles like a ton of bricks. Jenny takes them out to where she has the corner stakes of the corral all set, and hands them each a shovel.

"Ham you start and dig your string of holes toward the east. Rawson you dig toward the north." She bosses them like a slave-driver. "Two feet deep, mind you, and no shirking!"

As the glaring men pick up their tools, Jenny suddenly says, "Just a minute. I got to turn on my new windmill."

"But your cattle watering tank is plumb full now!" I observe, eying the new and expensive windmill and the new low round galvanized iron water tank.

"Yes, I know," Jenny replies, throwing the vane into the wind. "I sorta want to test the well."

She gathers up her skirt daintily, and crosses back to where Ham and Rawson are leaning on their shovels.

"Now boys, get set," Fluffy Ruffles commands. "Ready! Go!"

Ham spits on his hands, jabs the shovel into the dirt, tromps on it, and heaves. Rawson does likewise. Both men commence throwing dirt like a couple of badgers with a pack of wolves on their tails.

When the hole is two feet deep, they quick measure off fifteen feet with their shovel handles, and commence all over again.

It's a dead heat. The weight of Ham's foot on the shovel helps for the first foot or so. But when my plump pardner has to bend over to work, his corporation gets in the way and slows him down. Rawson is slower the first foot, but as the hole gets deeper, he makes time spooning out the last of the dirt. With his long arms, he don't have to bend over to reach the bottom. Half way around Jenny's marked off corral, the contest is still a tie.

The scorching sun mounts. Fluffy-ruffles changes to a cool afternoon dress and is carrying one of them two-bit sized umbrellas to keep the sun off her face. She smiles sweetly at Rawson, who speeds up in spite of his blistering hands. Rivers of sweat course down Ham's face as he matches Rawson hole for hole. Like a too fat bird dog, he's panting like a fire-engine. Sweat is soaking through his hat band, and great salt-rimmed crescents steam under his arms. The workout's doing my fat pardner more good than a Turkish bath.

From time to time I catch Jenny casting a speculative eye at me. I know that mooching look of hers. Shore enough, it ain't long in coming.

"Sheriff," she says in that gimme whine of hers, "It would be a downright shame if these holes caved in. Couldn't you fetch the fence posts from the pile and set them in the holes while we are waiting to see how the contest comes out?"

"Nope!" I come out flat footed. "I'm an old-time cowhand, ma'am—an open range man. I don't hold to fences of any kind. It would be against my principles to help build one."

"Just for me?" she coaxes, rolling her eyes kittenish and looking archly over the rim of that little parasol. "I'm just a poor girl trying—"

"To get a lot of work done for nothing!" I lower the boom.

"Humph!" she snorts, rocked back on her heels. "Afraid I might marry that pardner of yours? You're jealous, Sheriff!"

Then the frown wipes off her face, and she becomes all smiles.

"If you won't work," she goes on archly, "maybe you'd like to come up to the kitchen with me and fetch the boys a pitcher of lemonade."

MY EYES bug out as I go into Jenny's house. For a poor gal just trying to get along, she's doing all right! Her living room is furnished with new right expensive carpeting and elegant hosshair furniture. Large plate glass primping mirrors are everywhere. At every one she passes, Jenny pats her hair or shifts her dress, vainly admiring herself. But it's her kitchen that rocks me back on my heels. She has a big white ice-box! And out here it is only dudes who don't care what their living costs who can afford to freight in ice from Butte.

A new windmill. Running water in the house. New furniture. A huge ice box. Jenny shore must be making her ranch pay!

Jenny finishes the lemonade, and hands it to me.

"Say," I suggest, starting for the ice box, "them hot and tired gophers out there'd appreciate a bit of ice in this drink."

Quick as a mother bear blocking her cave entrance, Jenny hustles her bulk between me and the ice-box.

"No," she declares quickly, "ice would be bad for them. They are too over—"

A sudden ruckus from outside cuts her off. I sprint for the door. Jumping catamounts! From the splashing and commotion, it looks as if a couple of whales have been dumped in the shallow cattle watering tank. I hightail for it.

Ham rises from the surface, water streaming from his sea lion mustache. Rawson bobs up beside him. They grapple, wrastling like a couple of beavers, but not so playful. Water slops over the sides of the tank and sloshes on the dry ground.

Splash! Down they go again. Rawson rises, Ham's noggin caught under his arm in a chancery holt. He squats, holding Ham's head under water. My pardner's arms and legs thresh wildly like a net full of whitefish. He jerks loose, grabs an armful of Rawson's legs, upends him, and joyfully commences to tamp the bottom of the tank with his head.

"Ham!" Jenny screeches, pounding his shoulder with that little parasol. "Stop that! Do you want to pound a hole in my new tin tank?"

She reaches over, grabs Ham by his belt, and hauls him out of the tank. Dazed, bedraggled, and befuddled, Rawson flops to the surface like a played out trout. He staggers to the edge, leans over weakly, and heaves up gallons of water.

"What happened?" I want to know.

"Nothing," Ham pants, "Rawson finishes his last hole a few minutes before me. He claims he's won, and sets off for the tank for a drink. I finish my hole, and then note that somethin' looks fishy about Rawson's string of holes. I check. Shore enough, the polecat cheat has been stealing on each hole. Instead of fifteen feet apart, he has stretched the distance to sixteen and a half feet, gaining a couple of holes on me."

Ham grins, and goes on, "That burns me copious. So I just sneak up behind the longlegged cheater as he's bending over the water tank and up-end him into it! He squirms around, grabs my mustache, and hauls me in after him."

Rawson's teeth commence to chatter. "I'm gettin' a chill."

"It'll do Ham no good to chill either," I say. "Here, Jenny! I'll take both these terriers to the bunkhouse and see if I can rustle some duds for 'em."

"No!" Jenny's face clouds for a second. Then she recovers and goes on, "The boys left in such a all fired hurry, the place must be in a awful mess. I'll just scamper ahead and straighten up. It don't take but a minute."

Like a deer, Jenny bounds ahead of us, her fancy skirt held high in both hands. When we get to the bunkhouse, she's redfaced and panting from the speed with which she has straightened up the place.

She smiles sweetly. "Now I'm not ashamed of my untidy boys. You'll find plenty of dry clothes around."

While Ham and Rawson peel off their wet duds, I commence snooping like a rat terrier smelling a big rat. I paw through the closet, under the tables, and commence to explore under the bunks. The scent of rat gets powerful strong. I rise quickly, grabbing Ham's arm so hard I put finger marks on his bicep.

"What the—" he commences, and then closes his trap when he sees the expression on my face.

"Listen," I whisper. "Take a poke at Rawson and wrastle him over to the far side of the room. I want a better looksee at something."

A PUZZLED look flashes over Ham's face, but we've been through thick and thin for near forty years. He trusts me.

Without a word, he slithers across the room to where Rawson is pulling on a pairs of too short levis. Ham grabs ahold of the levis, jerks, and sprawls the unbalanced Rawson to the floor. His dander up, Rawson barges into Ham. They clinch, and roll to the floor. Ham, obeying orders like a good trooper, rolls Rawson to the far end of the bunkhouse.

I quick flop on my stomach, claw under the bunk at a loose board. I heave. Loose board, the devil! It's a regular trap door! I lift it, take one quick look, and slam it shut. Ham's keeping Rawson so busy trading pokes and gouges that he hasn't seen what I've been up to. I quick cross the room, pulling them apart.

"Rawson," I scold, "if you don't stop picking on my pardner, some day I'm going to wrap a gun barrel around your noggin!"

"Picking on—" Rawson dabs at his eye, which is commencing to show a nice purple mouse. "Why yuh dang fool!"

Raging he slams out the door, catches up his bronc and slopes toward Buckstrap just as Jenny barges into the bunkhouse.

Me and Ham leave Fluffy Ruffles gloating over her free dug post holes. We are just topping the second series of hills, when I ask Ham for the range glasses.

Focusing them on Jenny's ranchouse, I see her come out, shield her eyes with her hand, and take a long careful look in our direction. I jerk my head toward Ham and spur on over the hill out of her sight.

Dismounting, I creep back to the summit. Jenny is crossing the yard toward the windmill. She pulls the vane out of the wind, stopping it.

"Ham," I say, handing him the field glasses. "Take a look. Your gal has just shut off the windmill."

"So what?" Ham grunts.

"Oh, just that she started the windmill the minute we appeared, in spite of the fact that the tank was already full of water," I tell Ham. "In your scuffling with Rawson, you slopped about half the water out of the tank. Yet now Jenny stops the pump—even though the range steers Gomez is driving in to fatten will be thirsty as heck when they arrive."

"'Tain't natural," Ham muses, a queer suspicious look on his face.

"Shore it ain't," I agree. "I'll just stay here and watch things with the glasses. You rack into Sweetgrass, nose around, and then sashay out here and let me know if anything has happened."

At dusk, I skulk closer to the bunkhouse. The big full moon is just showing up over the Bear Paw range, when I hear the distant rumble of hard driven broncs. Four riders sweep into the corral. One is reeling in his saddle, holding on the horn with both hands. They dismount stiffly, all except the wounded man.

A shaft of light shows from the ranchhouse as the kitchen door opens and closes quickly.

"How much this time?" I hear Jenny's voice. "Who's winged?"

"Pedro. In the shoulder."

"How much?" Jenny ain't concerned about Pedro.

"Maybe twen'y thou'and. *Quien sabe.*"

My eyes swivel to the speaker. Ferdinand Gomez. Moonbeams glisten on pearl handles as he and the other two hands quickly strip the gear from their hip-shot tired mounts and carry it into the bunkhouse. They return, lift wounded Pedro from his cayuse, and carry him and his gear inside.

Jenny, fetching hot water and the medicine kit, disappears inside the bunkhouse. I Injun to a window with a busted pane.

"I think-so the sheriff is never goin' to go," Gomez says.

"Well, the suckers dug the fence post holes for me," Jenny says with a laugh, and starts dressing Pedro's wound.

After she leaves, Gomez pulls the bunk

I've snooped under away from the wall, and opens the trap door. From the space underneath, he hauls out four fancy stamped saddles with their glistening conchas and the rest of their foxy California hoss gear. Gomez then kicks through the trap door the pile of nester-plain gear they have just stripped from their tired mounts.

HE TAKES a quick look into the grain sack. A self-satisfied smile lights up his dark leathery face as he contemplates the money.

"We count it when we put heem in the ice-box tomorrow," he says, toeing the sack through the trap door and slamming it shut.

Crossing to his own bunk, Gomez rummages under the tick and pulls out a pair of plain walnut-handled cutters, the kind a sod-buster buys, mail-order.

"Get rid of the so-pretty guns!" he commands.

It's my chance. As the cowhands are changing cutters, I blast two shots through the window. The *vaqueros* whirl, see the smoking muzzles of my guns, and gape-mouthed, slowly elevate their hands.

Keeping them covered, I crawl through the window.

"On your stomachs!" I bark. "No funny business!"

From the ranch house there is a questioning halloo.

"Jenny want to know about them gun-blasts," I snarl. "You, Gomez, crawl on your hands and knees to the door. Say just one word, 'accident.' Any queer business, and I'll nail you!"

Obedient as a whipped puppy, Gomez travels across the floor, opens the door, and shouts, *"Accidente!"*

I hogtie the bandits one at a time. Then I cross to the bunk to have a look at the wounded man. He hasn't stirred.

"No bother heem," Gomez pleads. "He has sleep pill."

"Okay." I say, tossing all the guns in sight out of the window.

I am just bending over the trap door, when a sudden sound sends an icy gap-wind howling up my spine. The click of a shell being jacked home! I whirl. Too late!

The wounded bandit is sitting up in his bunk. His carbine, which I must have overlooked, is covering me. I'm licked. There is nothing to do but elevate, which I do.

Gomez, his jet eyes sparkling with triumph, slithers across the floor. The wounded man, still covering me with the cocked carbine held like a pistol in one hand, grits his teeth in pain as he works with his wounded arm at the knots binding the foreman.

A cold sweat breaks out all over me as the knot loosens. Gomez wrenches free of the rope. He bounds across the floor, savage as a puma. Jerking the gun from my holster, he crashes the barrel over my head with a Spanish oath. I go out like a nester's lantern in a blizzard. . . .

When I come to, Gomez is giving instructions to his two men.

"Eet mus' look like an *accidente,*" he tells them. "Take heem out in the canyon an' drop a beeg rock on hees head. Brush the tracks away with your blanket. The so-fat sheriff is not easy to fool."

"I'll say not!"

I jerk around. My heart does a joyous flip-flop!

Framed in the door is my good old pardner, Ham. His two steady guns, with their ears laid full back, cover the hootowls like a shroud.

"Watch the hombre in the bunk," I caution Ham. "He's got a thirty-thirty."

Ham slashes my bonds. In a few minutes we've got our pigging strings on the hoot-owls.

"What'd you find?" I asked Ham.

"The Shelby stage was pistol flagged by the pearl handled sports to the tune of twenty thousand," Ham clips. "Now yuh tell me. What's the idear of this little party? Gomez jealous of my attentions to Miss Jenny?"

"Just run your hand under Gomez's mattress."

"Ah-ha, pearl handled!" Ham ejaculates, fishing out the foreman's two fancy pistols. His eyes do a cat's back. "Him?"

"Yep!"

"Boy, we split a nice reward!" Ham's commercial mind works fast.

"In a pig's eye you will!"

I can still see Ham's jaw go slack and his mouth flop open like a fly trap. For Jenny is standing in the doorway, covering us with a ten gauge shotgun.

Now, no man in his right senses argues with a shotgun, especially if it is held by a jut-jawed woman. I drop my six-shooters, reaching tall. Ham too knows that

shotguns can be powerfully messy.

"California Kate!" he cries, reaching for the upper atmosphere.

CALIFORNIA KATE for shore! Just like the reward posters from San Altos describe her! Gone are all Jenny's vain fluffy ruffles. She's got on her business clothes, a miner's red flannel shirt, faded levis tucked into run-over-at-the-heel pee-wee boots, and a battered old sombrero jammed on her head. Around her middle are a thonged down brace of cutters. Pearl handled!

"Yeah, California Kate!" Jenny snarls. "And I like it here in Montana. The pickings are too good to let a pair of mosshorn lawmen stand in the way."

Without taking her close-slitted eyes off us, she jerks her head toward her ramrod, saying, "Gomez, take 'em out. Get rid of 'em. Drop 'em over a cliff—accidental."

"Gee, Jenny," Ham pleads, his voice as plaintive as a reservation Injun begging tobacco. "I didn't know yuh was California Kate! With all yore han'some clothes an' refined way, who'd know yuh was doin' the brain work for these hoot owls? Why, Jenny, I was all set to ask yuh to be Mrs. Hamilton."

All the time he is talking to her, Ham keeps edging closer. He stops when his chest is only a foot from the muzzle of the goose gun.

"Yuh always wear such scrumptious clothes, Jenny," Ham continues, his rumbling voice low and soothing as a feller's without a catch-rope trying to decoy a loose bronc close enough to grab an ear.

"Yuh'd look beautiful in a weddin' dress, Jenny," he goes on smooth as grease. "Think, with this Fargo money, we could get a new start some place else."

"Only," Ham's eyes drop to the top of her pee-wee boots, and he frowns something fierce. "Only, Jenny, yuh'll have to fix somethin'! Yore petticoat is showin'!"

That does it! Vanity gets her!

Jenny, forgetting she is wearing levis, automatically glances down at her showing petticoat.

Wham!

Ham's foot arcs through the air. The toe of his boot crashes into the forestock of the shotgun. His sweeping hand bats the muzzle to one side.

The ten-gauge blasts deafeningly. Gomez screams as the charge of birdshot tears into his legs. I scoop up my guns, covering dazed Jenny and her paisanos. Whitefaced, Ham slaps out the fire the muzzle blast has set to the side of his vest.

We tied up the bandits, handcuff Miss Jenny, and load her and the evidence in the buckboard.

"Hamilton," Jenny rolls her eyes pleadingly, the shoe now being on the other foot. "About getting married—my answer is yes."

"Nope!" Ham clips. "Thought it over. I couldn't keep yuh in fancy duds on a deputy's pay."

After we have collected the reward and have California Kate and her boys safe in the Deer Lodge prison, Ham throws a friendly arm over my shoulder.

"Egg," he says, "yuh always suspicioned moochin' Jenny. I figgered it was because yuh was jealous. How come?"

"Pard," I tell him, "when dealing with female women, your head ain't screwed on very tight. If you hadn't fell so hard for Jenny, you'd been able to add things up too."

"Such as?"

"Well, first off, remember the gaudy concha hoss gear Gomez and his riders sported? It struck me darned queer that with their five-hundred-dollar get-up, each of them was packing cheap seventeen-dollar-and-eighty cent cutters. At the same time, from all reports we got on the robberies, the gang had plain, bare nester hoss gear. But their guns were dolled up like a house afire, fancy pearl handles and all. I knew a California vaquero feels positively naked if he don't have some fumadiddle about his get-up. Gomez and—"

"But Miss Jenny—" Ham cuts in.

"I got suspicious of her from the way she always put the pump handle on you." I tell Ham. "Remember them queer clouds we saw after the Buckstrap bank holdup? Jenny knew where we were going, and they were smoke signals to Gomez. We were at her spread when our Sweetgrass bank was stuckup. When we left, Jenny hung out a couple of bed sheets on the clothesline, a signal that all was clear for Gomez and his boys to return. While she had you and Rawson all sewed up digging post holes, she had the windmill pulled into the wind as a signal to Gomez to stay away. With the

information that gal wormed out of you and Rawson, we didn't have a chance in the world of running into her precious Gomez and the evidence we needed to send him over the road.

"I've been a gol-darned sucker," Ham grunts, disgusted. "I'm off females for life!"

"Want to bet on it?"

"Yuh darned tootin'!" Ham shouts. Then a queer smile tugs at the corners of his mouth as he goes on, "Let's make it a *big* bet! Ten or fifteen cents!"

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(Continued from page 7)

ishes especially on the desert, though it needs more water than eucalyptus and the oldtime native tree of the Western bottomlands, the cottonwood.

The Fragrant Athol

Akin to the tamarix is the athol, more of a shrub than a tree, which has taken hold in a big way on bottomlands where cottonwood and willows only grew in earlier days. It spread fast along stream courses and irrigation systems. South from Utah and Nevada along the Colorado River, athol has spread, and along the shores of Boulder Dam grows thick as arrow weed in places. It has a fragrant purple blossom that attracts bees.

The thing is, one of these days we might see forests growing on the now-bare slopes of desert ranges. And like I mentioned in a get-together awhile back, bamboo will help solve the lumber shortage in days to come. It's another plant immigrant that flourishes in parts of the Southwest and Texas, growing 60 to 75 feet high. Bamboo is lighter and stronger than any native wood.

Weeds and other obnoxious plants have become unwanted new citizens Out West. The most pestiferous, beyond question, is the Russian thistle. Destructive insect pests of foreign origin have played havoc from time to time and there's an unending war against them.

A Changed Landscape

Old-timers say these numerous changes have altered the looks of the Western landscape in plenty of places. Even the wild grass has changed. With over-grazing, new plants have crowded in to take the place of native graze and browse.

Birds used to help control weed seed and insects. Now there aren't so many birds, specially game birds. Every time a farm boy shot a hawk there came to be more field mice. Every time a useful snake was crushed under hurrying wheels and by a destructive person, crop-eating rodents increased. The poisons used to get rid of the rodents got useful ones such as rabbits and tree squirrels, too.

In the course of time, maybe mankind will learn how to get along, not only with one another, but with Nature. But it's good to know that there are men that are doing as much to aid Nature as others are to hinder Nature's processes. Not much glory in this army of pest-fighters, no campaign ribbons or medals for the ones that battle on the beef, beet and bean front. They seldom get in headlines and nobody's worried about their housing problems and war nerves.

Fact is, of all the plant wizards since Burbank's time, mighty few folks can mention even one by name. Their monuments are full granaries, warehouses and loaded store shelves and in the cargo holds of ships sailing to needy lands.

Soil Miners

Along with outlaws and robbers another Western parasite is passing into the discard. He's been called "the soil miner" and "plow robber." In the past this character stripped valuable lands of fertility, gave nothing back. The new science of chemurgy knows ways to restore worn-out soils and how to keep heavily-cropped soil from being yielded to death.

The first we heard of this new science devoted to the important business of keeping the earth productive was a few years back in the matter of crop-rotation. Which now is familiar doctrine to nearly every dirt farmer and Western rancher.

Chemurgy is accomplishing wonders. From a soil sample a chemurgist can tell you the best crops to grow on it, what to do to make it produce better crops. These food-frontiers are more than fertilizer specialists and through their work new beds of valuable nitrates have been opened up in Idaho and elsewhere to restore croplands. Some soils need one treatment, other soils completely different treatment. The chemurgist prescribes for ailing soil like a doctor prescribes for a sick patient. There's no more guesswork in building up land production.

Flat land generally benefits by livestock being turned loose on it but in hilly country the hoofs of cattle and sheep start erosion, and loss of the topsoil. The top layer of a good deal of the United States has washed to sea, been blown off by the winds. The Department of Agriculture has figures and charts on the subject that are mighty startling. But men are at work learning ways to repair the damage.

Never will the sea give up its dead, but in the course of time ways may be found to re-

turn the bottom ooze to its inland valley sources. I've heard it said that atomic power could dredge all our harbors and dangerous shoals, and pipe the sludge, rich in minerals and organic substance, clean up the Mississippi Valley and elsewhere at economical cost. In this field, called colloidal chemistry, ways might be found to mine the sea's bottom of needed metals too.

Modern Pioneers

The exciting days of Indian warfare and other pioneer pastimes are over. But there are new realms for exploration and adventure today and tomorrow. So don't regret the passing of old days and old ways. There's plenty left for the modern pioneer to do.

I see where scientists are creating artificial rain and snow storms on an experimental scale and are working on ways to create climate and control the weather. Sounds sort of fantastic, doesn't it, hombres and hombresses? The idea of man-made lightning sounded just as fantastic in Ben Franklin's time. But the dream became a fact so common nowadays that nobody marvels at it.

[*Turn page*]

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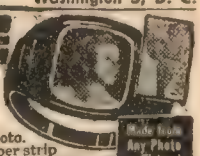

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I know a Western valley that was dreaded by pioneers because it was so hot and dry that immigrants sometimes died of thirst in crossing it. Later on settlers bored wells 30 to 40 feet deep and pumped irrigation water that made that desert valley blossom.

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On the other hand, we believe that one type of story can be overdone, and frequently is, until it loses its fresh appeal. So it is that in POPULAR WESTERN we try to give you the widest possible divergence in stories,

[*Turn page*]

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both as to characters and the periods of Western development in which they are set.

Take the three novelets we are featuring in the next issue, for example. One is a present-day story of the Immigration Service along the Mexican Border; the second, the story of a battle between the U. S. Cavalry and an overwhelming force of bloodthirsty Apaches, while the third involves a range mystery set in cattle country. About the characters, now. . . .

In the Immigration Service novelet, which author William Hopson has called THE BORDER PATROL, we have the man Tom Powers.

Powers was an ex-cowboy whose duty it was, together with a handful of other men of similar background, to patrol three hundred miles of trackless desert expanse along the Border. And like the others, he was a man who knew the desert like an Apache, who could go for days on jerky and pinole and find forage for a horse where there was little forage, and who didn't talk much but could shoot straight and be depended upon to follow orders.

But when Verne Thompson, the friend with whom he'd joined the Immigration Service, was killed by smugglers, Powers unpinned his star and stepped over the line into Mexico to try to get a lead as to the killer.

Creeping up to the padlocked shed of a sprawling rancho that had aroused his suspicions, he went to work on the lock. Powers had for years been fascinated by locks. They were his hobby. He picked this one easily and went inside.

The door creaked as it closed behind him. He struck a match and stared at the cartons of tequila and mezcal piled all the way to the ceiling. His eyes narrowed as he saw smaller packages too, and a brief examination was all that was necessary to reveal their contents. Drugs!

Powers let the match die out, turned to go, and then froze as he heard a hand rattle the loose chain on the door and a mutter of astonishment at it being unlocked. There was no time to lose and the officer didn't lose it.

He made a lunge at the door and knocked the intruder sprawling. A yell went out of the Mexican as he went down, his gun exploding accidentally as he fell. It roared out into the darkness and horses snorted and leaped while every dog within two miles began to bay.

Back of Powers lights had flashed on all over the place and men had begun to run.

A big light went on between the house and the barns and somebody began shouting orders in Spanish. A dozen armed Mexicans came spreading across the field.

Powers ran on, hoping to get to his horse. He saw it was a vain cause, though, and ducked into the protective shadow of an ocotilla fence.

There was going to be the devil to pay when Inspector Copeland found out he'd ventured into Mexico, he thought. Possibly dismissal from the service. Powers was aware that it hadn't been right, but he was remembering Verne Thompson and how he had been shot down. He was thinking of others who, in months to come, might suffer a similar fate.

Let it mean dismissal. He was still going to get the man who had killed Verne.

Tom Powers fell flat in the night as men came by within yards of him. Two had run to the corral and now loped out across the field, probably after his mount. They came by, dim stalking outlines in the darkness, and Powers, on an impulse, went in the opposite direction. He slipped back past the corral and toward the house itself.

"Stand where you are!" somebody said.

He pulled up and unconsciously removed his hat. The Saunders girl stood there, her honey-colored hair falling loosely to her shoulders, and surveyed him coolly from behind a leveled pistol. . . .

And that, folks, is just a bit of the suspense and excitement drummed up by the lively characters in THE BORDER PATROL, by William Hopson. It's a swell yarn. Look forward to it!

In the cavalry story, THE FIGHTIN' MAN, by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, we have a colorful character in the little, untried major, fresh from the East, who believed that most any military problem—even one posed by the Apaches—could be solved by a man well-versed in the strategy and tactics of that ancient warrior Alexander the Great.

If it's high danger and good, fast, bullet-dusting action you like, you'll enjoy THE FIGHTIN' MAN in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN.

But for rough-and-ready, down-to-earth characters, we'll take Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts of Painted Post every time. And it's these old friends who are involved in the range mystery, THE

[Turn page]

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There will be another Home Corral department, of course, as well as the usual batch of select and exciting short stories in that next issue. A lot of top-notch reading, pards, in that next gala issue of POPULAR WESTERN!

OUR LETTER BOX

NOW to the old mailbag and a few excerpts from some of your many fine letters:

I have been a reader of POPULAR WESTERN for quite some time now. I thought the stories, THE SAGA OF SILVER MALONE and THE THIRTEENTH MOON, in the February issue, were two of the best ever, but I enjoy them all. I'm completely satisfied with the magazine as it is. Just tell your authors to keep up the good work.—*Gary Gates, Clark, Colorado.*

We'll tell 'em, Gary. In fact, we do all the time! And our writers do their doggonedest to give us good yarns!

I really enjoy Doc Long Trail's HOME CORRAL and it's always the first thing I read in every issue. I like the stories too, of course, particularly those about Chick Bowdrie and the ones about Sheriff Blue Steele and Shorty Watts. I read a lot of Western magazines and so know what I'm talking about when I say that POPULAR WESTERN is the best of the lot.—*George C. Miller, Des Moines, Iowa.*

Thankee, George. And as for your last statement, we wouldn't think of contesting it.

I'm a reader of POPULAR WESTERN and like the stories in it very much. Especially the Ham and Egg series. In the story PANIC, in the February issue, how did you know that Craven killed Dennison? He didn't live to tell his story.—*Robbie Lee Dodd, Farmerville, Louisiana.*

An interesting point, Robbie. In the parlance of the publishing game, this is called prerogative of the omniscient, omnipresent author. In plain language, this simply means

the author is allowed to know all and see all, even to the innermost thoughts of his characters. The other characters didn't know Craven had killed Dennison. Corporal Brainard, of the Mounted Police, reported the death as an accident, you'll remember. But the author knew otherwise, which was his privilege.

I have been reading POPULAR WESTERN for a long, long time and think the stories are very good. I also like the HOME CORRAL department and never fail to read it. Would like to live in the West and plan to move to Arizona soon. I can buy POPULAR WESTERN out there, can't I?—*Gordon Britt Emery, Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

Sure thing, Gordon. You can get it most anywhere in the United States, and also special editions of it in many English-speaking foreign countries. Nice country, Arizona.

I don't see many stories about Buffalo Billy Bates any more. He used to be one of my favorite characters. How about giving us more of his exploits?—*Sue Wheeler, Los Angeles, California.*

Hang and rattle awhile, Sue. We've got some more Buffalo Billy Bates yarns coming up.

That about winds it up for this time, pards. If you haven't written us yet, come on and tell us what you think about the magazine. We really do enjoy hearing from all of you out there. And we welcome and appreciate all communications whether or not we find room to acknowledge them in this department.

All you have to do is address your letter or postcard to The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. Thanks again for all your grand letters, and let's see a lot more. So long till next time.

—THE EDITOR.

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